THE FIERY BRIDGE: SIMONE WEIL'S THEOLOGY OF WORK

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FOREWORD

Each of the five chapters of this study begins with a poem selected from the small collection composed by Simone Weil and published more than two decades after her death. The incorporation of this literary material represents my desire to be faithful to Weil's teaching that theology and the experience of beauty are one. In presenting these fragile images of her poetry I have provided a symbolic glimpse into the translucent nature of her spirit and placed guideposts from her inner journey into the text of her analytical effort.

I have been especially fortunate in the writing of the thesis. A number of people have given me the support and intellectual assurance that is critical to such an undertaking as that which follows. Simone Petrement, Weil's biographer, has kindly provided clarifications about her friend's life that have corrected misconceptions and prompted me to a greater vigilance in my reading of secondary sources. John Coleman, my thesis chairman, functioned as mentor and friend. He offered me understanding when my energies flagged and indicated directions when I felt overwhelmed. But most importantly, he read my words with the patient attention that Simone Weil prescribed as critical to

spiritual labor. I wish also to thank the other members of my thesis committee: Robert Bellah and Shaun Sullivan. Betty Over has also been a splendid friend and supporter. My friends and colleagues in the sociology of religion group—Mary Hunt, Rolando Juarez, Harry Levine, John McBrearity, Larry Rosenthal and my husband Joseph—have sparked insights, fueled enthusiasms and generally been there for me. Jerome Lawrence and Lydia Brönte helped in the translations of two of the poems.

The inconsistency in spelling (especially labor: labour) throughout the text reflects the difference in English and American translations of Weil's corpus. I have endeavored to avoid exclusive language in my own writing but have not modified Weil's expression. Where the translation of her work has been done by someone other than myself I have indicated this in the text; otherwise there is no mention of the translator.

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Abbreviations Used in Footnotes

First and Last Notebooks	1st & LNtbk.
Includes Prewar	"PWNtbk"
New York	NYNtbk
London	LNtbk
Gravity and Grace	G&G
Intimations of Christianity	Intim
La Condition Ouvriere	C.O.
Need for Roots	Nd.Rts.
Notebooks (Vols. 1 & 2)	Ntbk - 1 or 2
On Science, Necessity for Love of God	On S.N.L.
Oppression and Liberty	O&L
Selected Essays	SE
Seventy Letters	70 Letters
Waiting for God	WG
Venise sauvée	VS

PROMÉTHÉE

Un animal hagard de solitude . . .

An animal haggard from solitude,
Ceaselessly, a worm which chews him in the stomach,
Makes him run, trembling from fatigue,
To flee the hunger which he escapes only with death;
Looking for his life through dark woods;
Blind when the night pours forth its shadows;
At the hollow of the rocks stricken with mortal cold,
Coupling himself only by chance embraces;
At the prey of the gods, screaming under their blows—
Without Prometheus, men, you would be thus.

Fire creative, destructive, artistic flame!
Fire, inheritor of the rays of the setting sun!
The dawn rises to the heart of the too sad evening;
The tender hearth has joined hands; the field
Has taken the place of burned thorns.
The hard metal spouted out into the currents,
The hot metal bends and yields to the hammer.
A clarity under a roof fills the soul.
The bread ripens like a fruit in the flame.
How he loves you, to give such a beautiful gift!

He gave wheel and lever. Oh, marvelous!
Destiny bends to the weak weight of hands.
Need fears from afar the hand which guards
Over levers, mistress of the roads.
Oh winds of the seas conquered by a sail
Oh earth opened to the plow, bleeding without a veil!
Abyss into which a frail lamp descends!
The metal runs, chews, pulls, and grinds,
Docile and hard. Arms carry their prey,
The heavy universe which gives and drinks blood.

He was the author of rites and of the temple,
Magic circle to retain the gods
Far from this world; thus man contemplates,
Alone and mute, destiny, death, heaven.
He was the author of signs, languages.
Winged words go across the ages
By mountains, valleys, to move hearts, arms.
The soul speaks to itself and tries to understand itself.
Heaven, earth and sea keep quiet to hear
Two friends, two lovers speaking very low.

More luminous was the gift of numbers.
Spectors, demons go away dying.
The voice which counts has learned to chase the shadows.
Even the hurricane is calm and transparent
Each star takes its place in the fathomless sky;
Without a lie it speaks to the veil.
Act adds upon act; nothing is alone;
All answers on the even balance.
He is born from incantations pure as silence.
Often from time the shroud opens itself.

Thanks to him, dawn is an immortal joy.
But a destiny without sweetness holds him bent.
The chain nails him to the rock; his forehead wavers;
In him, while he hangs crucified,
Cold enters like a blade.
Hours, seasons, centuries chew away his soul,
Day after day causes his heart to grow weak.
His body twists in vain under the constraint;
The instant which flees disperses his complaint to the winds,
Alone and nameless, flesh delivered to grief.

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CHAPTER I

THE CIVILIZATION OF WORK

> Without work all life goes rotten. But when work is soulless life stifles and dies.[1]

Civilization in Crisis

More than forty years have passed since a young Frenchwoman distinguished by her intellectual gift entered the workroom of a factory to take up the gruelling tasks of a piece-rate laborer. That event of itself is notable because few, if any, women possessing a degree in philosophy from the Ecole Normale and licensed to teach even considered the prospect of manual work; none had preceded Simone Weil in willingly consenting to the daily regimen of factory life. The event, however, assumes larger significance and takes on its true meaning because it became the basis of a remarkable analysis of modern work and a unique theological reflection on human purpose.

When Simone Weil began her factory labors in 1934 her analytical lens was adjusted to the issues identified

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[1]Albert Camus quoted in Foreword, The Anatomy of Work by Georges Friedmann, NY, The Free Press, 1961.

as oppressive in the classic works of Karl Marx. She was determined to study the real conditions of industrial production and to discover what the chances might be for working class resistance to the exploitation said to be inherent in such production. Almost immediately she discovered that her vision was inadequate, that the rubrics and perspectives she had embraced before experiencing the routine of noise, malodorous space and "harsh necessity," were short of the mark. The depth of suffering and the scale of humiliation caused her to abandon her preconceptions about the laborer's lot and explore new levels of analysis and new modes of communication. In spite of her departure from the factory less than a year after she began this work, Simone Weil did not turn away from the experience nor was its painful memory diminished by the distance; the scope of her perspective grew until it incorporated cosmic boundaries. The demeaning circumstances of the wage earner and the persistence of brutal and arbitrary power of a few over many persuaded her that slavery had not ceased in the modern age. This insight drew her attention away from the microcosm of the workroom to the question of civilization and its decadence. She was to eventually connect the disjunction of worker and humanity to the disjunction between necessity and good. This connection led her to Christian teaching and the loss of supernatural truth.

During the Holy Year Pope Paul VI exhorted the Christian world to abandon the false comforts which reveal

"a senile and definitely out-of-date aspect of a commercial, hedonistic and materialistic civilization that is still trying to present itself as the gateway to the future."[2] His words seemingly echo those written by Weil decades before.

> Such terms as oppressors and oppressed, the idea of classes—all that sort of thing is near to losing meaning, so obvious are the impotence and distress of all men in the face of the social machine, which has become a machine for breaking hearts and crushing spirits, a machine for manufacturing irresponsibility, stupidity, corruption, slackness and, above all dizziness. The reason for this painful state of affairs is perfectly clear. We are living in a world in which nothing is made to man's measure; there exists a monstrous discrepancy between man's body, man's mind and the things which at the present time constitute the elements of human existence; everything is disequilibrium.[3]

On every level sorrow and the vertigo of meaningless activity overwhelm: the beauty and order of the Creator's universe is unseen; social relationships breed distrust and the institutions designed to serve enslave. Weil decries the topsy-turvy world of labor as an endless circle: we work to eat and eat to work and survival is without the nourishment of the soul.

Recent studies of the American worker have reported dissatisfaction and rage as commonplace realities.[4] In

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[2]Quoted from the Latin text Gaudete in Domino reported in The New York Times, May 17, 1975.

[3]"Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression," in O&L, p. 108.

[4]See Special Task Force of H.E.W., Work in America, Cambridge, MIT, 1973 and Peter Berger, ed., The Human Shape of Work, NY, MacMillan, 1964.

Terkel's oral history the soul's impoverishment is articulated by many of the subjects, none as melancholy as the following:

> Jobs are not big enough for people. It's not just the assembly line worker whose job is too small for his spirit, you know? A job like mine, if you really put your spirit into it, you would sabotage immediately. You don't dare. So you absent your spirit from it.[5]

There is no doubt that Simone Weil knew this self-division. She reported how menial labor forced her to abandon her thoughts and consent to a robot-like trance during the hours on the job. But it was precisely the first-hand knowledge of this process, the substance of fragmented performance, that she sought in her factory experience. During her years as a student and a lycée instructor she had been frustrated by the limits of her bourgeois knowledge, recognizing that the polemic of activists and the description of social scientists gave her no direct entry into the life of the working class or to their sufferings. Her job was too confined as an academic because she was sheltered from "harsh necessity." Her job was unquestionably too small as a factory laborer. But for Simone Weil to have remained at the first without experiencing the second would have stifled her soul and her restless quest for truth.

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[5]Studs Terkel, Working, N.Y., Pantheon, 1972, p. 521; identical words are reported by Georges Friedmann, op. cit., p. ix, "here the man is bigger than his job." (Friedmann's emphasis)

The pilgrimage to truth marked Simone Weil's life. Tragically short in duration she filled thirty-four years with intense curiosity and reflection—experience and thought always intertwined. She kept notes and jottings and experimented with a variety of literary approaches. In all her writings she was loyal to the words she penned as her last: "teach what it is to know (in the scientific sense)."[6]

Born in 1909 the younger of two children to a bourgeois Parisian couple who were secularized jews, Simone Weil enjoyed a childhood relatively sheltered from the kinds of social concerns that would monopolize her attention in later years.[7] Her immediate family circle was warm and solicitous, always eager to affirm a young girl's curiosity and somewhat bemused by her quick wit and mischievousness.[8] Although a series of illnesses marred the otherwise smooth passage of carefree days, little disrupted the Weil household. When Dr. Weil was called to service as a physician at the outset of war, the family cheerfully

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[6] 1st & L. Ntbks, NY, Oxford Univ. Press, 1970, p. 364.

[7] The most comprehensive biography and the one used in this abbreviated discussion of Weil's biography is Simone Pétrement, Simone Weil, A Life, NY, Pantheon, 1976.

[8] Anecdotes abound in the Pétrement study: she notes the nicknames used by Simone for her parents (Biri and Mime) and Andre's name for his sister—the trolless, indicating that these terms of endearment brought the family closer.

followed ready to adapt to the nomadic life they would lead for almost five years.

War is a significant reality in the life of Simone Weil. Only a small child when the first great European war began in 1914, she was not oblivious of its terrible consequences. She had "adopted" a soldier at the front, sending him letters and certain goods, only to experience his loss shortly after she met him. At the age of eight she learned directly of the terrible consequences of war. It may well be that her study of Homer's epic poem, The Iliad, and her fascination with the nature of heroism reflects this early trauma.[9] The final years of her life were shaped by the circumstances of European politics—the Civil War in Spain and the outbreak of war between Germany and the allies—and she died a victim of broken morale.

The youth of Weil's short life is defined principally by her educational achievements. She began her distinguished intellectual career at home, learning to read through her brother André's prompting, consuming French classical literature with considerable gusto and eager to discuss what she understood of Racine and Balzac. In her fifteenth year she began her formal study of Philosophy with the luminary Le Senne at the Lycée Victor Duruy but it was not this teacher who touched the deep curiosity

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[9]See Weil's The Iliad, A Poem of Force, Wallingford, Pendle Hill, 1962.

and love for truth that would later mark all of Weil's thought. Although she admired Le Senne it was the luminary Alain who captured her mind and heart during the three years of study at Henri IV Lycée.[10] An iconoclast in his pedagogy and politics who instructed his students to read with a finely adjusted lens, the redoubtable Alain presented the texts of Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Descartes and Kant in the most compelling light; he also taught the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers and Homer's Iliad as serious resources for philosophic analysis. Weil's writing is infused with her mentor's enthusiasm for these texts. While still a student of Alain's she wrote short essays, called "topos," which anticipated her life-long concern for those who suffer.[11]

Weil did not succeed in passing the entrance examination for the Ecole Normale the first time she took it because of a low grade in history but upon re-testing she performed with extraordinary competence. It was during the period when she was studying for this test that she went to the Sorbonne to prepare for her philosophy teaching license. There she encountered Simone de Beauvoir and the anecdote is told of the two peers exchanging bitter words about their political identification with the poor.[12] De Beauvoir

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[11] Pétrement explains that two of the topos written for Alain concerned the saintly behavior of two figures who chose to suffer rather than jeopardize the lives of others, pp. 36-37.

[12] Pétrement, p. 51.

reports that Weil asserted that feeding the needy was the greatest imperative while the former held that knowing the basis of their existence took precedence; "It's easy to see that you have never been hungry," Weil remarked and that ended their brief exchange.

Her academic achievements were considerable in the years spent at the Ecole Normale in spite of her devotion to political causes and the irritation of the school's administration with her radicalism. Her activism won her the reputation of an irrepressible crusader for human rights and pacifism and won her the nickname—an appellation not intended to be complimentary—of the "red virgin."[13] She was committed, as well, to the trade union movement and collaborated with several of her Ecole classmates in the Social Education Group which provided lectures to railway workers on various cultural subjects. In later years this involvement in workers' education would help to form the basis of a program she proposed for the reconstruction of post-war France and the regeneration of labor.[14]

The energy and direction she brought to her political activism did not deter her from attending to her

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[13]Bougle, the school's assistant director, is reputed to be the source of the nickname. After Weil had left the Ecole and arrived at the "outpost" she was assigned to, she sent him a postcard of the local "red virgin"; this gesture represents one of many indications of her disposition to tease and accept in good humor the assessment of others about her personality.

[14]See Nd. for Rts, passim.

intellectual responsibilities as a student of the Ecole. She completed her diploma thesis on Cartesian epistemology during her second year and demonstrated to the faculty that her philosophical investigations were both original and substantial. She wrote of Descartes' analysis in terms of the dangers posed by reliance upon the imagination in daily life; this position guided her inquiries and critiques of ideological texts. She never wearied of warning against the treachery of rubrics and optimistic projections about revolution, nor did she abandon her hope for a better society based upon knowledge of reality.

In 1931 she secured her agrégation—the certificate that permitted her to teach in the French lycée system. She had completed her work seventh among one hundred and proven her excellence as a scholar. In spite of this achievement, her request for an appointment to a school in a large industrial center was rejected by the Minister of Education in all likelihood because her reputation had preceded her application and every measure was taken to detour her political efforts. She was assigned to the provincial city of Le Puy where, ironically, she quickly established herself as a radical activist and became the subject of a public scandal in a matter of a month. Weil had developed a rapport with the city's unemployed and joined their number in urging the city's officials to provide jobs and a better wage. Her visibility as the young lycée instructor of philosophy mixed up with strikes and labor demands caused

the school embarrassment and resulted in the rector's admonishments. On one of these occasions Weil is said to have retorted: "I have always regarded dismissal as the natural culmination of my career."[15]

But she was not dismissed from her position at Le Puy. At the end of the academic year she secured a transfer to the lycée at Auxerre. It was not an assignment that she had desired but it undoubtedly gave relief to the officialdom of Le Puy. One of the reasons for her disappointment in this new appointment was that she would no longer be able to make the frequent trips to the industrial city of Saint-Étienne, the center of syndicalist activity that nourished her political appetite during her first year of teaching. The cessation of these political pilgrimages did not put a halt to her trade union involvements, however, during her stay at Auxerre nor did it make her a more acceptable faculty member in the administrator's eyes. Again she found herself the subject of a transfer after a year's work and was given a post at Roanne for her third year.

Teaching only sixty miles from Saint-Étienne, Weil was able to resume the pattern of weekly commutation to her friends and the projects associated with syndicalist politics. The Thévenons were deeply attached to trade

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[15]Cabaud, p. 67.

unionism and encouraged her to participate in study groups composed of construction workers and miners organized for the discussion of social and economic ideas. Although Weil's earlier experience in the teaching of laborers had been called into question by certain of her associates, this experience found her expert in the communication of a variety of materials related to current events.[16] Her instruction of bourgeois lycée students in the subjects of philosophy and literature was not substantially different from her work with laborers or from her contributions to the radical press. She demanded that her students and readers develop critical skills to deal with the social issues of the day and expected that her audience—wherever they be—study the implications for change. She wrote prolifically about the events developing in Germany, the failures of the revolution in the Soviet Union, her differences with Marxists, especially Trotsky; her word appeared in print in many small socialist and radical journals and produced a variety of reactions.[17] There was nothing of consequence that escaped Weil's judgment, including the

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[16]Pétrement writes that the railway workers found her lectures puzzling and Cabaud reports that she had consciously struggled to improve her approach: " . . . now she built each talk around one idea only and also distributed an outline to her audience for absolute clarity." (p. 93)

[17]Among the journals: La Révolution prolétarienne, L'Ecole émancipée, and La Critique social; Trotsky reacted to Weil's indictment of Soviet administration by labelling her an adherent of "old liberalism." See Pétrement, pp. 176-179.

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splintering developments within the movement most dear to her (the syndicalists). Her essays repeated a message of concern about the illusory hopes for a proletarian uprising on the Continent and warned of the dangers emerging from Hitler's political success.

In the early winter of 1934 Weil abandoned her academic work to engage full time and for a considerable duration in factory labor. She had written a long essay on the nature of oppression in the months preceding this decision and concluded that her studies of worker relationships required firsthand exposure to the realities of the industrial workroom. The experiment lasted less than a year but it proved to be a veritable baptism by fire that marked her for life. Not one of her later essays was without some reference to this onerous experience and the notion of affliction that pierced her being and made her a captive to the institution of modern slavery. Even after her return to lycée responsibilities in the Fall of 1935 in Bourges the pain of factory labor lingered in her memory and the desire to alleviate her former co-workers' plight distracted her attention. She sought more information about factory organization from a manager in Bourges and composed some plans for reform.

With the outbreak of civil war in Spain Weil hastily arranged a journalist's status and pass and left for Barcelona. Her parents followed her as far as the border fearful for their daughter's life and with good reason.

She had managed to convince the leader of a band of reconnaisance soldiers that she was able to participate in their missions in the Ebro River area. Ironically, she sustained an injury shortly thereafter at the front but not as a consequence of combat; she was seriously burned by spilled cooking oil and was forced to leave camp and submit herself to hospitalization. There, in Sitges, the Weil family was reunited and, after many weeks of insistent pleading by Dr. and Mme. Weil, the injured woman returned to Paris.

Weil's recuperation was long and painful, precluding a resumption of her teaching during the balance of the school term. She traveled to Italy in the Spring of 1937 in the hopes of becoming physically healed and was to enjoy during this brief respite one of the happiest periods of her life. This pilgrimage for health became the occasion for her spiritual awakening and aesthetic inspiration. Less than two years before she had sought healing from her factory experience in Portugal and begun a passage to Christ in a little fishing village. In her testimony of spiritual growth written to Father Perrin several years later she explained that the melancholy chants of the villagers compelled her to recognize her bond with them as a slave. She mused that this slavery was associated with the mystery of the crucifixion and Christian identity.[18]

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[18]See "Spiritual Autobiography" in WG, p. 67.

The fragility of her health was not improved by the excursions to the Mediterranean in 1935 and again in 1937 although the Umbrian landscape refreshed her and the moments in St. Francis' chapel in Assisi fortified her spirit. On her return to France she attempted to take up her teaching at Saint-Quentin but the frequency and severity of headaches made this impossible. She requested a leave of absence; it was the first of a series that led to her eventual departure from lycée responsibilities. When she was finally strong enough to teach in 1940, the regulations of the Vichy regime against Jewish professionals barred her return.

Weil's religious pilgrimage began in Portugal and was intensified during the Spring of 1938 when she journeyed to Solesmes to hear plainsong during holy week. Plagued by headaches and unsettled by her hopes for world peace in the face of growing antagonisms among the European nations, the Benedictine chants proved soothing. While in Solesmes she was introduced to the English metaphysical poets by a young man she called "angel boy." Later that year she read further from these poets and found George Herbert's poem "Love" especially beautiful. She committed it to memory and recited it whenever her headaches were particularly disarming. On one of these occasions she experienced a conversion event where "Christ himself came down and took possession" of her.[19] The intensity of this moment never

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[19]Ibid., p. 69.

lessened; thereafter she practiced a prayer-like ritual which kept her close to Christ and all of her work was infused with spiritual meaning. In the years immediately preceding the Second World War she composed a number of theoretical tracts which gave voice to the motif of suffering and transcendence. Her analysis of Homer's Iliad is especially illustrative of the manner in which a political theme is recast into a religious one. Force is understood, in that essay, as the predominant experience in the human condition; those who reject its violence and suffer because of this opposition are identified by Weil as the spiritually endowed and tragically destined. Humiliation and exile become the lot of the sufferers for justice and love.

Weil, herself, experienced exile with the fall of Paris in June of 1940. She fled south with her parents first to Vichy and shortly after to Marseilles where she busied herself in an extraordinary commitment to writing. She explored a variety of subjects—comparative religion, folklore, history and mysticism—with insatiable curiosity and a belief that these materials would reveal the intrinsic unity of supernatural reality. Her studies offered unique assessments of the Cathars as the true descendents of Plato's spirituality and European folklore as the reservoir of pre-Christian symbolism. In this same period she began the work on a three-act drama, Venise sauvée, which remained unfinished at the time of her death. The play derived its

locale and time from the history of Saint-Réal—the sack of the city by mercenaries in the seventeenth century. Its meaning, however, embraces all of the major motifs in Weil's thought: affliction, betrayal, heroic stature and universal beauty.

Two critical friendships were established during Weil's stay in Marseilles: Father Perrin and Gustave Thibon. Both of these men became her confidants and were entrusted with important manuscripts in the period before she left France. Both of these friendships carried her through the turmoil of politically unsettled times and nourished her spiritual life. But the friendships were short-lived. The Weil family's decision to leave their homeland for safer shores in June 1942 ended the intense discussions that characterized the relationship of Simone Weil and Thibon and Perrin.

Uprooted first from Paris and then from her native soil and good friends, Weil experienced tremendous sorrow; she wrote of those feelings: "I am the color of dead leaves, like certain insects." She would never return to France but she did not know this in 1942 and immediately set to work upon arriving in New York to return to the Continent. She contacted friends in the liberation movement in London and convinced them that she would be a useful partisan. Her efforts, in part, succeeded; she managed to cajole the staff of the Free French to assist her in coming to England but she failed in her efforts to re-enter

France. She hoped to parachute behind occupied lines but was stationed, instead, behind a desk in London assigned to the compositon of a major plan for the reconstruction of post-war France.

In the winter of 1942 she grew ill from frustration and despair. She felt alienated from the leadership of the Free French and saw that her plans were never to be realized. Her resolution to eat little as part of her symbolic unity with the French took its toll on her frail health; she suffered from malnutrition and collapsed in a state of fatigue in the early Spring. Her condition was diagnosed as curable—pulmonary tuberculosis—and she was hospitalized for treatment. Weil proved to be an uncooperative patient, refusing the prescribed nourishment and her condition worsened by mid-summer. At her request she was transferred to another health facility, in Ashford, in August. She failed to respond and died of cardiac arrest at the age of thirty-four. Several days after her death on August 24th an inquiry concluded that she died a suicide "while the balance of the mind was disturbed." After a simple graveside service attended by neither priest nor family member but only a small band of friends then in England, she was buried at Ashford. This lonely parting is expressed, in part, by the words attached to her gravestone and written by an anonymous hand in Italian: "My solitude

held in its grasp the grief of others till my death."[20]

Weil's words and deeds converged in her absolute commitment to truth. She was a selfless actor who, as an admirer writes, lived "close to history."[21] She lived between two major wars, a member of the generation of Europeans who witnessed ceaseless economic depression, social disorder and political violence. Her writing exposes the wound and trembles in pain; a compatriot speaks of her lucidity in these words: "She is not there, and it is one of the most beautiful flowers of her charity: these pages have transparency, humility and the sovereignty of an intercession."[22] She sensed this about herself without any indication of conceit. To Father Perrin she wrote of her vocation to anonymity, "ever ready to be mixed into the paste of common humanity."[23] Her mission was special, a truth bearer, but not a source of joy. Only weeks before her death she wrote to her parents:

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[20]Quoted from Geoge Panichas, ed., The Simone Weil Reader, N.Y., David McKay Co., 1977, p. xvii.

[21]Robert Coles' assessment in Robert Coles and Daniel Berrigan, "A Dialogue Underground," N.Y. Review of Books, April 8, 1971, p. 17.

[22]Victor-Henry Debidour, Simone Weil ou le transparence, Paris, Plon, p. 44.

[23]"Hesitations concerning Baptism," WG, p. 49.

> . . . you think that I have something to give. That is the wrong way to put it. But I too have a sort of growing inner certainty that there is within me a deposit of pure gold which must be handed on. Only I become more and more convinced that there is no one to receive it.
>
> . . . To receive it calls for an effort. And effort is so fatiguing![24]

In 1934 Weil composed a long essay she affectionately called her "Testament" and magnum opus. Her continued belief in "Reflections on the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression" is indicated by the fact that this essay was one of the few documents she entrusted to Thibon when she departed from France.[25] It is a remarkable testimony of despair and hope that reveals Weil's life-long struggle against the illusory content of written history. She asks why material progress has not stilled the cries of social oppression and responds to her own question by indicting the belief in technical innovation as a source of human betterment. "We accept the false values which appear to us," Weil writes towards the end of her life, "and when we think we are acting, we are in reality motionless, for we are still confined in the same system of values."[26]

According to Weil's reading of civilization there had been a time when humanity labored freely, worshiping

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[24]"Letter #66," July 18, 1943, 70 Letters, p. 196.

[25]Pétrement, p. 472; he was also given the Notebooks, sections of Venise sauvée and her poems.

[26]G&G, p. 99.

Gods as exemplars of artisan works.

> When humanity fell away from a civilization illumined by faith, probably the first thing it lost was the spirituality of labour.
>
> Today, what is seething in our society is precisely the aborted conception of a spirituality of labour.
>
> Would this be a sign that a cycle is completing itself?[27]

Slavery eroded the faith workers held with respect to their labor, reversing the relationship of submission. Where once nature constrained the "primitive," and "caprice" held all action bound to a servility defined by custom, today the labor of most is captive to human arrogance. Progress has not promoted the human condition:

> . . . man has not emerged from the servile condition in which he found himself when he was naked to all the blind forces that make up the universe; it is merely that the power which keeps him on his knees has been as it were transferred from inert matter to the human society of which he is a member.[28]

Is it possible she muses, echoing the question posed by Rousseau two centuries earlier, "that man is born a slave . . . that servitude is his natural condition/?/"

The loss of spiritual labor is attached to the manipulation by force of matter. If there had been an ideal equilibrium where egalitarianism reigned, there

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[27]"London Notebooks," lst & L.Ntbks, p. 337. She writes of the "infallible signs" of spirituality of labor in ancient Greek religious belief but writes elsewhere that "Greece is the youth of humanity . . . the manhood of which the youth gave promise has not developed." ("PWNtbk," lst & L.Ntbks, p. 25)

[28]"Reflections," op. cit., p. 80.

had been no freedom from superstition and the primitive acquiescence in nature's enigmatic power. Moderns, on the other hand, have increased their knowledge of matter's laws and shed their fears of its potential terrors but at considerable cost to social equality; the price of nature's secrets would seem to be human liberty. External constraints have always burdened the labors of the farmer and the artisan but technology harnesses the human worker of the modern age and subverts all that which is creative and whimsical. Collective strategies and goals imprison the factory laborer for the purpose of increasing productivity and profits.

Technological civilization is marked by this paradoxical mastery over matter and the simultaneous loss of control by those who execute the task. Act and consequence are severed according to Weil's account and force the laborer to exert effort without purpose. The consequences of this approach—rationalization—are not limited to the factory worker; this "decadence" shapes everything:

> The contemporary <u>unconscious</u> domination is turning against itself and is in process of destroying not only the spiritual but the material bases of contemporary civilization—(destruction of products—anarchy of the products—war).[29]

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[29]"PWNtbk.," op. cit., p. 59, Weil's emphasis.

This frightening course exempts no one from its sweep: "all technical progress is now working against all men (against all men, irrespective of class)."[30] Position in society, Weil avers in contrast to her Marxist contemporaries, makes little difference in the face of a divisive trend that upsets all balance:

> The conditions of modern life destroy the mind-body equilibrium in everything, in thought and in action—in all actions: in work, in fighting . . . . In its every aspect, the civilization we live in overwhelms the human body. Mind and body have become strangers to one another. Contact has been lost.[31]

Ancient values grounded on measure and equilibrium have given way to the pressures of consumption, the traditional simplicity in the relationship between effort and accomplishment has been weighted by a proliferation of "intermediaries." The distance between knowledge and action increases with time. Thus it is a combination of thoughtlessness and the objectification of the doer ("thingness") that emerges with technological adeptness. Three "monstrosities" accompany this development: money, algebra and mechanism as the idols of the civilization. All three are beyond comprehension. Only a small band of elite grasp their function and almost no one their catastrophic implications for humanity.

Weil is hesitant about the possibilities for change.

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[30] Ibid. Weil's emphasis.

[31] Ibid., p. 38. Weil's emphasis.

She believes that centralized civilization will disappear as other civilizations have in the long course of history.

> When our whole centralized civilization collapses, mass-production will collapse at the same time. But knowledge of machinery will continue. So, therefore, through a period of anarchy, disorder, misery, there will be re-created . . .?
>
> One should not put one's money on catastrophe. But neither should one fight against it with bare hands. There are two things we have to keep in mind: 1. to save ourselves—i.e. not to go mad in a mad world. This is already much. 2. to do everything possible to prepare . . . with no illusion about the effectiveness of our efforts.[32]

Citing the courage of Socrates who taught himself to play the lyre while awaiting his death, Weil avows to "make as much effort for the faintest hope as for the strongest." She decries escapism into memories of a time past and holds equally futile the idle dreams of a better day. It is necessary to undertake a "critical survey" of civilization, to disclose the circumstances which permitted "unconsciousness" to overwhelm thought and action. But such a survey, she adds, is impossible "because of the shortness of human life and the impossibility of collaboration or of successors." In spite of this she concludes that every effort should be made to bring technical knowledge to the worker and create a climate of trust and respect in the workroom.

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[32]Ibid., pp. 44-45. Weil's emphasis.

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The conditions of industrial production hold possibilities for liberation as well as the oppressive realities which crush the human spirit. Weil argues for the elimination of arbitrary power, the division of labor that severs intelligence from execution and the mistaken assessment of worth in monetary terms. She firmly asserts "the time has come to give up dreaming of liberty, and to make up one's mind to conceive it." Her conception depends upon a notion of revolution in these earlier excursions into labor but it differs from the Marxist vision; it is to technique that she directs her attention rather than property relationships. In later analyses, including The Need for Roots, the place of spiritual development and community attachments deepens her sense of revolutionary change. In all of her writings, however early or late, Weil demands decentralized governance, apprenticeship training that entails a comprehension of machinery and the goals of production, and the demystification of all productive processes.[33]

The Centrality of Labor

> It is always man's greatness that he re-creates his life. He re-creates what is given him. He creates the very thing he is suffering. By work, he creates his own natural existence.[34]

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[33]Ibid., p. 60; she writes that "it is necessary that the work process should not be external and alien to the worker."

[34]Ibid., p. 44.

Fundamental to Weil's vision of a healthy social order is the notion of an equilibrium of three activities: art, science and work. She writes that one activity without the other two would be "a poor, vain and empty thing" because the functions of each contribute to a unity that reflects the work of the Creator. She illustrates her meaning by pointing to the convergence of finite energy and infinite reality in the following passage:

> . . . the sailor in his boat balances equally against the infinite forces of the ocean. . . . At every moment the helmsman—by the weak, but directed, power of his muscles on tiller and oar—maintains an equilibrium with that enormous mass of air and water. There is nothing more beautiful than a boat.[35]

Underlying this reflection is a complicated theology of God the Creator and human purpose.

For purposes of locating Weil's theology of work in this larger setting four major themes have been distilled from her theological reflection. The most basic one presents creation as the consequence of Divine love that withdraws. "The Creation, the Passion, the Eucharist—always the same movement of withdrawal. This movement" according to Weil, "is love."[36] Creator and Son are bound together through a love that reaches across a distance that defies human imagination.

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[35]Ibid., p. 20. Weil's emphasis.

[36]"NYNtbk.," 1st & LNtbk, p. 81.

> The Creation is an abandonment. In creating what is other than Himself, God necessarily abandoned it. He only keeps under his care the part of Creation which is Himself—the uncreated part of every creature. That is the life, the Light, the Word; it is the presence here below of God's only Son.[37]

The radical separation of the creature from the Creator is experienced as a "spiritual quartering" which afflicts all humanity but is only recognized for what it is by those who have become "spiritual laborers." The debilitating condition which Weil carefully distinguishes from physical pain is called malheur (affliction); its piercing ceaseless presence reminds the victim that an infinite distance separates life as necessity from life as good. Only in the supernatural realm does good reside in a perfect form united with truth and beauty.

The consequent anguish brought about by the truth of God's distance from human life is a starting point for the "spiritual laborer." It is a step toward the imitation of divine love which abandons the loved ones for the sake of creation's autonomy. Weil writes: "God can only lessen the affliction of mankind, whilst not ceasing to remain withdrawn far from his creatures, through the mediation of those who love him and who, out of love for him, desire no longer to be."[38] The imitation of the Father is an act of

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[37] Ibid., p. 103.

[38] Ntbks, Vol. 2, p. 402. Weil's emphasis.

withdrawing from the things of the world that nourish the self as ego; the selfless actor follows the Son by surrendering the self to another in compassion.

> When we are lacking in compassion we make a violent separation between a creature and God.
>
> Through compassion we can put the created, temporal part of a creature in communication with God.
>
> It is a marvel analogous to the act of creation itself.
>
> . . . Compassion is what spans the abyss which creation has opened between God and the creature.
>
> It is the rainbow.[39]

The rainbow expresses the optimism Weil holds for those who can elude worldly illusion. The darkness of chaos and the grim circumstances of social reality are not eternal curses which condemn humanity to futile activity. God's love is everywhere in evidence—the rainbow, the sea are but two manifestations of beauty and the order of the universe.[40] God's gifts to creation are necessity and intelligence which will assure in the absence of supernatural reign upon the earth an orderly creation and the faculty to discern this beauty. Weil believed that the ancient Greek geometers were alone in their recognition of this divine generosity and reflected their wonder and appreciation in a mathematics that was at once an aesthetic

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[39] "NYNtbks," op. cit., p. 103.

[40] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 379.

celebration and a science of fundamental truths.[41]

A fourth facet of Weil's theology is the notion of love as restraint derived from Plato's teaching in the Timaeus. Weil assimilates the notion of the Creator-Artisan into her own theory of supernatural love, emphasizing the exemplary role of potential power and the lesson of renunciation. In the Timaeus it is Reason that persuades Necessity to the Good.[42] Accordingly, in imitation of this divine moment human actors are to "consent not to be," to "de-create" themselves in order to cross the wide abyss between this world and that of the transcendent. Weil writes that "the world provides itself with its own food by means of its own destruction" and submission to nature is the way for human imitation.

The tension between power and limit, eating and looking, self-love and love of God's intermediaries (beauty and the human community) fill Weil's reflections with a sense of paradox. She recognized that "Contradiction is the lever of transcendence" and insisted upon the "impossible" as a sign of transcendent reality.[43] Malheur, the

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[41]See "NYNtbk.," op. cit., pp. 79-80; she writes that "because their mathematics was a theology" certainty was a central concern.

[42]See especially lines 68e-69a of Timaeus (Cornford, tr.).

[43]Note Maurice Blanchot, L'Entretien infini, Paris, 1969. His chapter on Weil (Ch. 4) focuses on the role of the impossible.

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unendurable affliction of those who feel God's absence is the sine qua non for grace and the fueling of the human soul. Similarly paradoxical in Weil's meditations is the notion of justice as a universal desire and an impossible achievement.

Dialectic rhythms frame Weil's discourse on human labor as well. Her theology of work is both a refinement of the idea of divine love and an elaboration of the vocation of the spiritual laborer. One of Weil's critics regards the clarification of spiritual labor as the central impetus for all of her effort.[44] It is certain that she infused her theological discussion with metaphors and images from the work-world and, similarly, drew upon her theology of creation and the cross to talk about the meaning of human labor. She presents several definitions of labor in her writing but the common theme throughout is that of free and intelligent consent.[45] The Platonic Creator refused to manipulate the elements out of chaos into order through force; reason persuaded necessity. Thus Weil emphasizes this moral-theological example in her analytical essays and her more lyrical jottings in the

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[44]Richard Rees, Simone Weil, Carbondale, Ill., University of Southern Illinois Press, 1966, p. 33: "The spirituality of labour is a difficult expression, and it would hardly be too much to say that the whole of Simone Weil's work is an attempt to elucidate it."

[45]Among her definitions: "consent to the order of the universe," "the original pact between man and nature, between the soul and its body."

Notebooks. The "Testament" of 1934 celebrates Bacon's formulation particularly as a departure from the biblical mandate to work as a condemned offender; she writes:

> . . . the idea of labour considered as a human value is doubtless the one and only spiritual conquest achieved by the human mind since the miracle of Greece; this was perhaps the only gap in the ideal of human life elaborated by Greece and left behind by her as an undying heritage. Bacon was the first to put forward this idea. For the ancient and heart-breaking curse contained in Genesis, which made the world appear as a convict prison and labour as the sign of men's servitude and abasement, he substituted in a flash of genius the veritable charter expressing the relations between man and the world: "We cannot command Nature except by obeying her."[46]

In the years after the composition of this passage Weil essentially held to this view but baptized Bacon's maxim. She eventually understood obedience as a bridge across the human and supernatural divide. In both the early and later understandings she recognized affliction as a companion of the worker.

Weil's theology of work is above all a theory of transformation. With her decision to undertake factory labor in order to discover the strengths of workers' consciousness Weil began a long study of the nature of work as a transforming engagement of human actors. She had originally believed that the Marxist perspective was questionable with respect to the effectiveness of proletarian

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[46]"Reflections," O&L, p. 106.

organization but she had hoped that the conditions of production would stir the workers to seek radical change. She quickly adjusted her view after a few hours on the job, recognizing that the principal function of transformation in the industrial work-place was that of converting human beings into robots. The pervasive atmosphere of despair formed by frenzied and meaningless activity, ill-tempered and arbitrary orders, impatient and hostile co-workers convinced her of the improbability of socialist revolution based upon proletariat rage. Disgust and fatigue shaped the factory worker into a veritable slave with ambition only for a higher wage and a longer respite from the onerous chores at hand.

Having experienced this dehumanization process first hand, Weil was not satisfied to think or write about social and economic revolution as the solution to human injustice. While she continued to attack capitalism and the evils of a centralized corporativism throughout her life, she sought a solution that would address itself to the deep needs of the laborer: the restoration of dignity and the recognition of a creative and intelligent participation of each and every citizen became critical concerns in her effort. Revolution as an idea continued to inform her approach but it took on a spiritual meaning that reflected the mediatory role of Christ upon the Cross. She reasoned that the very same affliction that shattered the spirit and bent the body brought the worker

that much closer to supernatural life; malheur was both the ailment of the dehumanized laborer and the necessary condition of redemption.[47]

Weil's delineation of spiritual labor assumes the relevance of human imitation of both divine creation and sacrifice. She notes throughout her meditations on Christianity that the circle and the cross are one and the same; to rise from suffering the spiritual laborer must accept affliction but revolt against the pull of earth's gravity.[48] The revolution is one of mind, body and spirit rather than a corporate solidarity of one social class against another. Healing of the fragmented self will come with a radical shift in gaze and posture: Weil calls upon the spiritual laborer to descend into the void of pain in order to become a whole person. This act, she avers, will result in a lifting beyond the immediate and bring the laborer to a selfless love for neighbor and the beauties created by God that constitute universal order. Head turned to the infinite, eyes cast patiently toward the radiance of another, mysterious realm—that, indeed, is the revolution Weil projects as the only meaningful one for humanity.

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[47]Note her definition of labor as "ransom from original sin; participation in the redemption." (Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 170)

[48]Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 498; Weil explores the image of the circle and the cross as a unity.

A vision of reconstructed society appears in Weil's notes as well as in the explicit program composed for the Free French in 1943 (The Need for Roots). "A society," she advances, "in which the two poles are obedience and attention—labour and study" would assure the individual of a purpose both worldly and transcendent.[49] She refused to abandon her hope for a better social order even though her personal experiences in the years immediately before her death proved debilitating. The vision shares with Plato's Republic an ideal content which may never be implemented. It does, however, forward a perspective that locks together the quest for a good life with the reality of necessity. The agony of malheur will persist but, with proper spiritual instruction and discipline, it will become the vehicle for a wonderous reconciliation with Christ. It will carry the victim to the side of all who suffer and furnish the warmth and light of compassion. For an instant divine love inhabits a cold and dark place and melts the chill of social isolation.

Weil's theological reflections on work were never systematized nor did she regard them as proper "theology." She used a language which was particular and attempted to demonstrate through her insights that all of human history reflected a striving to bridge the distance between creation

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[49]"London Ntbk.," op. cit., p. 358.

and Creator. Three terms recur and constitute the basis of the discussion in the following chapters: malheur, attention and metaxu. The first term has been introduced as one conveying the piercing affliction which transforms the person into victim; its full meaning will be developed in Chapter Two in the context of necessity and obedience. The second term, attention, is also a negative word with a transforming power. "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object," writes Weil adding that "it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of."[50] Malheur and attention are related to one another as steps in a process and as experiences of the void—the body is assaulted and debilitated by affliction, the mind is suspended by attention. The result of this body-mind transformation, a hollowing out, is spiritual retrieval of the hidden gifts from God.[51]

Weil is not unaware of the demands placed upon the spiritual laborer. She makes no pretense about the rarity

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[50]"Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," WG, p. 111.

[51]Weil writes in her essay "Beyond Personalism" that there is "a natural alliance between truth and misfortune, because both are mute supplicants, forever condemned to remain voiceless in our presence." (1952 Cross Currents, Vol. 2, p. 70; originally published in La table ronde, 1950).

of those who have not fled from affliction into the world of day dreams and illusory expectations. They may be children, village idiots, broken laborers who have a pure genius for the spiritual and are unwilling to abandon the cause of truth, beauty and justice. Concerted effort is required to hear these voices, an attentive stance that demands of the hearer self-denial and even then:

> one can count only on those who have gone over to the other side of a certain boundary. Indeed they are not numerous. They are probably rare but nevertheless we cannot count them for most of them are hidden. Pure good is sent to us from heaven only in imperceptible quantities, either to the individual or society. "The black mustard seed is the smallest of seeds." Proserpine ate but a single grain of pomegranate. A pearl buried in the middle of the field is not visible. You cannot see the yeast mixed with the dough.
>
> But just as catalysts or bacteria work in chemical reactions so in human matters the imperceptible grains of pure good operate in a decisive manner simply by their presence, providing they are placed where they are needed.[52]

The third chapter attempts to elaborate the relationship of attention as a negative method and to disclose Weil's sense of genius as the bearer of the tiny mustard seed. Her hero Jaffier, the betrayed and the betrayer of the drama Venise sauvée, offers the reader a tragic glimpse into this mission.

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[52]Ibid., p. 75; she warns that hearing these muffled cries of anguish requires a transposition of the self which risks self-annihilation.

From what has been said regarding the negative functions of *malheur* and *attention* it would seem that Weil's approach leaves little for the optimist. However, the third term of the triad belonging to her theology of work, *metaxu*, provides both a concrete and a positive dimension. It is an ancient Greek term for bridge and derives the full sense of its meaning from Weil's reading of another of Plato's works—*Symposium*, the dialogue of ancients about the nature of love.[53] She interprets *metaxu* as intermediary relationships which are at once expressions of love and affirmations of a self that has been liberated from both the "I" and the "We"; individual gratification and collective zeal are cast aside for authentic community.

The fourth chapter explores Weil's notion of the intermediary relationship in the context of a civilization of work. In this reconstructed society the "Great Beast" —a rubric derived explicitly from Plato and referring to the tyrannical rule of the deluded—will be conquered. No longer will the citizenry be subject to propaganda that teaches and reinforces a false sense of national greatness and idolizes a heroism based upon brutality and terrorism. Weil advances a vision, especially in *The Need for Roots*, which sees history wrenched from the control of "victors" and returned to the populations that have long been forgotten or exploited and voiceless.

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[53] See *Ntbk.*, Vol. 2, p. 450.

The civilization of work is, in Weil's scheme, a decentralized web of self-sufficient communities founded on shared belief and ritual. At the core of her vision is a notion of rootedness—that is, spiritual rootedness. The cultural symbols and rituals of a given community are rooted in the supernatural. She writes that human cities, "each more or less according to its degree of perfection, surround the life of their inhabitants with poetry. They are images and reflections of the city of the world."[54] To destroy these cities, and that is what the "Great Beast" does, is the greatest of crimes because it cuts away the bridges that lead the inhabitants to transcendence.

The metaxu represent both social connections such as family units and work-room units and personal commitments. Weil understands genuine heroism as the transformation of the self into a metaxu; she identified certain literary and historical figures with this selfless mission and wished that she too might function as a pure intermediary.

> To be only an intermediary between the uncultivated land and the ploughed field, between the data of the problem and its solution, between the blank page and the poem, between the wretch with an empty stomach and the wretch with a full one.[55]

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[54] "Forms of the Implicit Love of God," WG, pp. 180-181.

[55] Ntbk., Vol. 1, op. cit., p. 126. Weil's emphasis.

The spiritual laborer is a pilgrim who throws off the fetters of illusion in order to bask in the full radiance of supernatural illumination. This pilgrimage, Weil tells us, takes the pilgrim across a multitude of bridges through affliction and disciplined attention to a civilization founded on the human sentiment of love for neighbor and the beauties of nature. The journey requires constant labor, a labor always of this world but focused upon the transcendent. Weil advances the value of mundane, physical labor as the effort most connected to spiritual passage. In labors which demand the veritable exchange of body and earth, muscle and rock, a transformation resembling the moment of death and the crucifixion itself will carry the laborer beyond the earth's downward pull.

The Imperative to Read

> Reading—unless a certain quality of attention be put into it—obeys the force of gravity.[56]

Lecture, the method of correct reading in Weil's scheme, is based upon a radical doubt about the taken-for-granted reality. It is at once a method of thought and contemplation which denies the substance of rubrics and the commonplace and calls into question another's interpretation of text. In Weil's approach, the text can be a written page or the physical milieu in which the reader is placed; the text demands commitment to intense

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[56]Ibid., p. 160.

study (looking) and a trained eye (literacy).

Weil's notion of reading originated in Alain's pedagogy which fostered a suspicion about the author's intent and the reader's interpretation; it fostered, as well, a confidence in the reader and inculcated a spirit of free inquiry. Alain's teaching inspired a belief in authentic democratic education which understands critical analysis as a skill not limited to a small population of elites but available to every student willing to work hard at abandoning preconceptions and patient scrutiny of texts. Weil applied this method to her politics and to her own teaching of philosophy; she challenged the conjectures of revolutionary activists about the viability of workers' consciousness; she developed the notion of worker's culture as one which would offer Greek classics and the rudiments of geometry, physics and philosophy to the laborer as background for participation in a scheme of "industrial democracy."

The method of lecture assumes the equal importance of intuitive intelligence and rigorous training of the mind. Its substance reflects and importance of Plato's metaphor of the cave for Weil particularly in its use of the imagery of light and shadow. "Truth," she wrote, "is the radiant manifestation of reality" which is never known by those who cling to the dark walls of the cave and choose a bleak security. Those who remain protected from the blinding light of reality shun truth and the good,

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atrophying body and soul in this illusory camp of the aberrant. Those, on the other hand, who expose themselves to the searing light of the truth will grasp "a piece of reality."

Two essays address the question of lecture as such in Weil's contribution, both composed during the period she lived in the south of France exiled from Paris.[57] She argues, following Plato's imagery, that reality seizes the seeker from without, its source and unity an inexplicable mystery. "There is a mystery in reading," Weil avers, "a mystery which contemplation is able to aid without doubt but not to explain, enabling us to know other mysteries in human life."[58] Truth, good and beauty reside inextricably together in purity and oneness but this unity cannot be comprehended despite the efforts of sages and ideologues. Weil asserts this as "The most important truth:

> The mysteries of the faith can be and have been used in the same way as Lenin used the Marxian dialectic (in both cases contradiction as a logical criterion of error is eliminated): they are used, by shrewd manipulation of the anathema, for the total enslavement of minds. By the elect, who disdain both rebellion and servility of mind, they are turned into ko-ans by contemplation. But their secret lies elsewhere. It is that there are two different kinds of reason.

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[57]"Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies," op. cit. and "Essai sur la notion de lecture," published posthumously in Etudes philosophiques, N.S.1, Jan. 1946, pp. 13-19.

[58]"Lecture," ibid., p. 13.

> There is a supernatural reason. It is the knowledge, gnosis . . . of which Christ was the key, the knowledge of the Truth whose spirit is sent by the Father.
>
> What is contradictory for natural reason is not so for supernatural reason, but the latter can only use the language of the former.
>
> Nevertheless, the logic of supernatural reason is more rigorous than that of natural reason.[59]

Only through intense looking is the reader able to imitate something of this rigor.

Reading mediates between the sensory and the evaluative faculties, melting away the opacity of false impression. Patient dwelling upon the text will result in the gradual disclosure of the hidden which, Weil observes, "is more real than that which is manifested." The mysterious unity of supernatural reality is imperceptibly yielded through this attentive discipline and the consequences are dramatic for the reader who reaches beyond the surface. Sensations reach the reader which are equivalent to physical blows to the body, leaving the subject stunned by new meaning. Weil cites the example of a lonely pedestrian crossing a footpath at night who comes upon the ominous outline of a crouching shape. What is frightening at first glance is reduced to a sense of relief as the stroller comes closer to the object—it is merely the shadow of a tree. The imagination stirs up error and must be set

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[59]"NYNtbk.," op. cit., p. 109.

aside by the careful scrutiny of a trained eye and mind. Reading is just such an apprenticeship. Referring to a folk maxim about the maturation of an apprentice, Weil notes that as the universe enters the body illusion painfully slips away.[60] Malheur is experienced as the self uprooted; the greater the desire to abandon illusion and move toward reality, the greater the burden of the cross. The phantoms of imagination are released leaving the beholder exposed to naked truth. It is a stance of detached attention which renounces the attractions of public idols and the pull of gravity for an open acceptance of the nature of things in relationship.

Critical to Weil's analysis of reading is the belief in worldly reality as a topography of layered quasi-truths.

> The world is a text containing several meanings, and we pass from one meaning to another by an effort—an effort in which the body always participates, just as when we are learning the alphabet of a foreign language this alphabet has got to enter into our hand by dint of forming the characters.[61]

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[60] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 21: "To change the physical relationship between oneself and the world . . . through apprenticeship, the workman changes the physical relationship between himself and the tool. . . Physical injury: this is the trade entering into the body. Let all suffering make the universe enter into the body."

[61] Ibid., p. 23.

In order to grasp the letters of the alphabet it is necessary that the new reader sense them in their roundness; reality cannot be known as a flat surface.[62] She prescribes a course of action where "several cross-sections" be made, adding that "a single cross-section leads to error." Our reading functions to decompose gravity's resilient surfaces which hides the truth from those illiterate in transcendent language.[63]

The metaphor of "the blind man's stick" appears in Weil's discussion of reading and laboring; it is an instrument that extends the self outside of the body into an unfamiliar but significant reality. The apprentice tool-user is like a sightless wanderer who must tap out the parameters of meaning without grasping the whole reality. It is a painful process,incurring falls and clumsy gesture, but with a steady application of the self as a means between the faculty for sensing and the discrete objects of the world, a modest truth will be yielded.

Thus it is appropriate to speak of the "blind man's stick" in constructing Weil's theology of work. Since she neither composed a systematic essay on the subject nor

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[62]Note the delightful fantasy of Edwin Abbott, Flatland, N.Y., Dover, 1952 which echoes this vision.

[63]Behind the surface lies a reading of necessity, behind necessity, order and order leads to God.

indicated that there were to be certain components in such a theory, the material that follows in this study is interpretive. A veritable tapping out the layers of significance has been undertaken and what appeared, at first glance, as unwieldy proves to be orderly. The reading of Simone Weil in both a comprehensive and multiple manner provides a coherent scheme which revolves around the motifs of malheur, attention and metaxu.[64]

Many of Weil's critics fret over the fragmentary character of her writing, its aphoristic style, its history of publication. It was this lack of system, perhaps, that prompted Camus to collect and publish many of her works.[65] Despite the confusion over her corpus, there is an inner order; one critic expresses it in these words: "She is all of a piece, even if it is an odd piece."[66] Careful reading of her contribution indicates that it is not an "odd piece" at all but a problem related to her premature death and an early resistance to the creation of system

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[64]Weil writes that imagination dissolves the third dimension, "only real objects . . . are in three dimensions." (Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 160; the triad plays upon this notion of multiple dimensions.

[65]Ten titles are published in the "Espoir" collection under the original direction of Albert Camus—Gallimard; see bibliography for further detail.

[66]E. W. F. Tomlin, Simone Weil, Cambridge, Bowes & Bowes, 1954, p. 14.

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that accounts for the character of her written contribution. Alain's _propos_, short essays concerned with concrete critical analysis of social and philosophical issues, provided a model for Weil and shaped the scope and content of many of her works. Her early essays were written for publication in a variety of small radical journals and addressed a number of pressing political questions.[67] The long essay Weil embraced as her "Testament" was clearly intended for eventual publication but it was not printed before her death. The literary writings were also intended for publication and, in part, remained unfinished; Weil continued to change phrases and lines in her poetry and never wrote all of the tragedy _Venise sauvée_. The last work prepared for the Free French (_The Need for Roots_) was not written with publication in mind and did not bear the title given it by her publishers.

The motifs of the theology of work derive from multiple and intense reading from the whole of Weil's corpus but three works are particularly important: the journal collected in _La Condition ouvriére_, the three-act drama, and the manuscript composed in London for post-war reconstruction (_The Need for Roots_). These three works reflect

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[67] Pétrement's discussion of Weil's writings includes an excellent review of the publication history of the same. Note also the bibliography prepared by J. P. Little, _Simone Weil_, London, Grant & Cutler ltd., 1973.

the connection between life experience and intellectual contribution most dramatically and advance the meaning of malheur, attention and metaxu as both analytical and chronological points in a long pilgrimage toward the mysterious unity of truth, beauty and good. Weil writes that "Human life is a composition on several planes" and it would be a certain disservice to her contribution not to read her "on several planes."

The final chapter of this study takes up the matter of lecture as an evaluative method. Weil's triadic arrangement of themes is contrasted with other expressions of work theology, particularly as malheur, attention and metaxu relate to contemporary French thought. Although a surface resemblance emerges between her analysis and those of the three schools (penitential, creationist and eschatological), the striking feature of Weil's contribution is her commitment to an integrated perspective.[68] She advances a vision of the civilization of work that holds human activity, labor especially, to the ground, that recognizes the mundane character of this effort, but discovers within labor the means for lifting away from worldly oppression.

Another facet of lecture concludes this study. It

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[68]See Joseph Thomas, "Three Basic Approaches to a Theology of Work," in Louis Savary, Man: His World and His work, N.Y., Paulist Press, 1967, pp. 176-180.

is the critical reading of Weil's critics. Long a subject of controversy, Weil's contribution and life have lost the clarity that must have once obtained; she wrote of her experiences with certitude about their meaning.[69] Three major questions have been selected for a closer look; each concerns the character of her commitment and its connection to the written word. These expressions of criticism distract from the substance of Weil's contribution and demand a response based upon lecture. One controversy relates to Weil's religious identity, posing the question of her ambivalence toward the Catholic Church and her alleged anti-semitic stance. A second concern is that of her solitary disposition and the allegation of a neurotic personality incapable of coping with worldly matters. The last question goes to the heart of her political identity and suggests that Weil's activism was, at the very least, aberrant. Each of these concerns touches upon the meaning of affliction, attention and the role of the intermediary in Weil's life. A great deal of reading is necessary to dislodge the illusion that has flourished around her name. This brief section is a first attempt at serious reading through the myths to an inherent order and beauty.

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[69]Note M. Blanchot, op. cit.; he argues forcefully about the quality of certitude in Weil's writing.

NÉCESSITÉ

Le cercle des jours du ciel désert qui tourne . . .

The circle of an empty heaven's days which turn
Among the silence before mortal eyes,
Yawns open here below where each hour burns
So many cries—so suppliant, so cruel;

All the slow stars in the steps of their dance,
Solitary and fixed, mute brilliance on high
Without form despite us, without name or cadence
Too perfect, bedecked with no flaw to our eye;

To those suspended ones, our wrath is vain.
Allay our thirst as you break our hearts.
Clamoring and desiring, their circle pulls us;
Our brilliant masters would always be the victors.

Rend the flesh, bonds of pure clarity.
Nailed without a cry upon the fixed point to the North
The naked soul exposed to all injury.
We want to obey you until death.

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CHAPTER II

THE GRIM REALITY OF ANIMAL LABORANS

> The problem is, in short, to know what it is that links oppression in general and each form of oppression in particular to the system of production.[1]

Painful Knowledge

After months of intense study that probed the relationship between technological innovation and human freedom, Simone Weil had completed the writing of her "Testament." This long essay took a critical look at Marxist expectations and concluded that a revolution led by and for the proletariat was not the solution to centuries of oppression. Her prognosis was melancholy but she held out hope in the form of better knowledge about the realities of laborious work. Her theoretical explorations had strengthened her belief in the viability of the materialist method and she began to search out an opportunity to put it to the test.

The occasion for her study of oppression and liberty was the year's leave of absence from teaching and its focus was to be on the connection between industrial organization and worker's consciousness. The first months of her leave

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[1] "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression," in O.&L., p.56.

were spent in the composition of the "Testament" and coming to terms with the insufficiency of speculative reasoning about the capitalist mode of production. She had become convinced that only direct observation of and actual participation in the processes of industrial production would yield the concrete knowledge necessary to further analysis. Thus, when a job developed for her at the Alsthom Electric Company in the early winter of 1934 she was most eager to commence a second phase of study. She could not be deterred from this step although friends and family tried to discourage her and the times were less than hospitable for a novice day laborer. In the midst of European economic crisis, confident that she was going to promote the scientific study of factory labor Simone Weil crossed through the gates of that Parisian plant and began a long and often discouraging journey.

Perhaps she understood her effort as a pioneering one. She had bitterly attacked Marxist writers for their lack of scientific precision in the years prior to her factory employment and was most impatient with their alleged failure to apply the materialist method to their analysis.

> The materialist method—that instrument which Marx bequeathed to us—is an untried instrument; no Marxist has ever really used it beginning with Marx himself. The only really valuable idea to be found in Marx's writings is also the only one that has been completely neglected . . .[2]

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[2]"Reflections . . .," ibid., p. 46.

Her presence on the factory floor may well have been a challenge to her leftist contemporaries who not only failed to undertake studies faithful to their founder but remained attached to a pre-scientific posture about social change. She faulted them for a Lamarkian perspective, confounding cause and effect and subscribing to a doctrine of classes when the individual experience was primary.[3] She held that Darwin had corrected Lamark, not only with respect to his assertion that function creates the organism but in the scope of study itself. Individual experience set in the rich complexity of activity ought to be the scientist's concern and she set out to observe precisely this in her factory labors.

There was another issue stemming from Marxist theory that also prompted her inquiry into the factual "conditions of existence" within the factory. It was the vision Marx held of a non-divided labor, that is, the integration of intellectual and manual labor. While Weil did not consider herself its symbolic expression in doing the work of the day laborer, she was especially irritated with the aloofness of Marxists to non-theoretical activity. The

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[3]Note the discussion of Lamark and Darwin in "Reflections," pp. 58-59: "In order to be able to appeal to science in social matters, we ought to have effected with respect to Marxism an improvement similar to that which Darwin effected with respect to Lamark. The causes of social evolution must no longer be sought elsewhere than in the daily efforts of men considered as individuals."

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perpetuation of two labors was only enhanced by the theorist's lack of practical experience and, clearly, the separation of the worker from the realm of theory. Writing an impatient review of Lenin's methodology, she warns of this divisive tendency.

> All oppressive societies give birth to a false conception of the relationship between man and nature, from the mere fact that it is only the downtrodden who are in direct contact with nature, that is to say those who are excluded from theoretical culture, deprived of the right of and opportunity for self-expression; and conversely, the false conception so formed tends to prolong the duration of the oppression insofar as it causes this separation between thought and work to seem legitimate.[4]

Weil approached her job with a conscious plan to document the particulars of a reality that was little understood but much discussed by most of the French left-wing. Although securing the necessary work papers and the job itself through the assistance of a friend (Boris Souvarine), she remained relatively free of special treatment or constraint; her true identity was effectively concealed from co-workers and the foremen. She became a virtually new person during these months, moving into a small apartment in the factory's neighborhood, following a routine that had nothing to do with her life as a teacher of young women. On one level she lived a life without distinction—

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[4]"Lenin's Materialism and Empiriocriticism," 1933, O.&L., p. 30.

laboring alongside her co-workers and suffering the same indignities they suffered. On another level her efforts were exceptional, heroic—a novice laborer bending over unfamiliar machinery, plagued by headaches, frightened of harsh judgments and dejected by the lack of genuine fraternity.

Weil's discovery after a few weeks of physically exhausting and spiritually abusive work was that her sense of metamorphosis into a veritable beast of burden linked her to the slaves of antiquity. She was set apart from the rest of society like those ancient toilers—hidden from view and hiding much of the awesome rage that burned within. Her sense of this condition suggests the ubiquity of Arendt's grim depiction of the animal laborans.[5] In the ancient milieu of the Greek household wife and slave functioned in this role, repeating innumerable tasks that served the needs of the husband-master without respite. The chief characteristic of animal laborans is detachment from the public sphere—both slave and wife remain concealed behind the walls of the home, unknown and certainly disdained by the citizens of the polis. They are marginal to their own history although the community could not have existed or persisted without their respective labors. Why

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[5]See Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1958, especially Ch. 3 "Labor"; note that the title of this chapter incorporates both Arendt's language and meaning.

were they held apart? Arendt concludes that they were "hidden away not only because they were somebody else's property but because their life was 'laborious,' devoted to bodily functions."[6] Not coincidentally were Weil and her co-workers stripped of a public life, but their minds and bodies gave way entirely to the pressures of production; they became, as Weil often states, the modern slaves.

Weil found the hidden dimension a compelling reality. She pursued it from her library into the factory workroom, and she embraced it in her theology of an absent divinity. In her earlier writings Weil approached the hidden as darkness, as the milieu of the blind; later, the hidden becomes a matter of transcendent reality and loses its melancholic aspect. However, in 1934 Weil's pessimism about the future of human society dwells upon the unseeing, groping actors of history. She describes the adherents of left and right ideologies as devoid of sight and vision for a better age. She wrote that "the struggle between the opponents and defenders of capitalism is one between blind men."[7]

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[6]Ibid., p. 72. The private character of labor continued into the modern period; Arendt writes: " . . . the laborers were hidden away and segregated from the community, like criminals behind high walls and under constant supervision."

[7]"Fragments," 1936, O.&L., p. 130.

The affliction of non-seeing was associated with illusion, the latter caused by the former. She understood her project of factory study to be remedial, of bringing eye-sight literally behind the plant's gates. She was also confident that such seeing would locate solutions to certain of industry's more disabling effects upon the laborer. In fact, the worst aspect of rationalized technique was, for her, the lack of vision open to the worker. Specialization and fragmentation precluded a viewing of the whole task and without such a holistic grasp, Weil feared that dissatisfaction and alienation would only fester without resolution. It is significant that she prefaced her work journal with two statements about the laborer's perception and purpose.

> Not only should man know what he is making but, if possible, he should see it in use, so that he may see the modifications he works on nature.
>
> Each object that a man makes should be for him an object of contemplation.[8]

These two sentences reveal the ideals of transformed vision Simone Weil carried into the Alsthom workrooms and tenaciously clung to during the months of her labors there. Each ideal has its source in one of her intellectual mentor's insights, both require a radical change in the way labor understands its purpose and meaning. The first reflects

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[8]"Journal d'Usine," in C.O., p. 35; note that the emphasis is Weil's and the translation that of J. Cabaud (see his Simone Weil).

her indebtedness to Marx and the vision of an integrated work, suggesting an activity free from the fragmentation that marks industrial labor. That this vision is repeated in her journal as a preliminary statement is most relevant, given her impatience with Marxism. A distinction between her appreciation for Marx, for his achievements as a social critic of capitalism and her renunciation of Engels, Lenin and certainly Stalin must be made. She bore no malice for the original "scientific socialist" and embraced his projection of a liberated working people without reservation. His followers, sadly, suffered from a myopic condition, according to Weil, precluding them from seeing deeply and comprehensively into the present circumstances.

Plato's influence is even more pronounced in Weil's thought and certainly in her conception of an ideal work incentive. Unfettered knowing, reflection not distorted by propaganda or false consciousness, was her personal goal and one she held out for all of her co-workers. The allegory of the ancient philosopher which told of a captured group held in a cave illuminated solely by fire-light is particularly relevant in this context.[9] The second prefatory sentence of her journal resonates the theme of contemplation, a mode of seeing beyond immediate perception.

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[9]See The Republic, Ch. 7, l. 514a-521b); note that the cave image recurs as a central one for Weil in her rejection of illusion.

It calls up Plato's instructions to the philosopher to re-enter the dim cavern and guide the semi-blinded dwellers toward the true light. For Plato and for Weil the issue was one of eluding the shadow-reality that seized most and directed their gaze away from the truth and good. Weil's entrance into the Alsthom plant was not a descent into the cavern, although the environment suggests certain parallels: its hidden character, and the flickering light of the furnace. She came to discover truths for herself and did not approach the workers as so many dwellers of the cave, blinded and groping for substance. Her efforts were not oriented toward consciousness-raising or labor organizing; nor would she lead the laborers out of the plant into another life. There was, in fact, nowhere to go—French society was simply a larger cave.[10]

There was little solace in either the vision Simone Weil held of a free laboring society or in the factual conditions she encountered on the job. She was rapidly seized by the "oppression in particular" she had come to document and would remain in its frightful sway thereafter. Although she had some foresight about labor's harshness, she was unprepared for its chilling and persistent reach. As a preface to her "Factory Journal" she had jotted in the original

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[10]Note the distinction drawn by Alan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," The Republic, p. 403, which understands the philosopher as a guide rather than a torch-bearer. The task, he argues, is to gradually acclimate the cave dweller to the true source of illumination.

Greek Homer's line from the Iliad: "Much against your will, yielding to a harsh necessity."[11] She did yield, burning her energy at an incredible pace, to perform the tasks of production. In so doing, she illuminated a dark corner of society.

In Pursuit of Reality

> . . . believe me that no one could understand better than I your aspiration for real life, because I share it.[12]

Not long before her routine was filled with the arduous assignments of the workroom, Simone Weil wrote a letter in answer to one sent her by a former student. It concerned the question of pursuing "real life," given the severe economic crises the European market was experiencing in 1934. Her letter strikes a particularly grave tone, explaining that the worst misfortune is to remain an indigent, dependent upon parental charity. Autonomy requires that one set out on one's own, prepared to face the difficulties of reality. The letter provides a rare glimpse into Weil's own anxiety about self-control.

> You said in your letter that you were impatient to escape from this unreal life and to find yourself at grips with the material necessities of existence. But, alas, there

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[11]"Journal," p. 35; the quoted line is from Mary McCarthy's translation of Simone Weil's Iliad, A Poem of Force.

[12]"Letter #4," 1934, 70 Letters, p. 9.

> are not many people nowadays, especially in your generation, for whom it is possible to confront those "necessities." Because apart from those whose bread is already buttered, the majority are in thrall to the misery of unemployment or to a degrading dependence which has no appearance of "necessity" but only a crushing fatality which one no longer even tries to resist . . . it is the worst cruelty of our time that makes it very difficult to give precise meaning to the words "real life."[13]

Within a few months she wrote again to the same correspondent and the mood of her letter has lifted, communicating delight in her new contacts if not her assignments.[14] She tells how the "world of abstractions" has been left behind, how the phantom figures of the French working class have taken on flesh and that there are "real men—some good and some bad, but with a real goodness or badness."

The joy of being a worker among other workers was an experience long hoped for. The "Testament" had expressed her scientific objective to use materialism as a method and the job provided the opportunity for this inquiry. Another text and another attitude (best described as one of personal self-mastery) conveys still a different, more subjective reason for her joy.[15] She was determined to locate herself

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[13] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

[14] "Letter #5," Spring 1935, ibid., p. 11.

[15] The account which follows is taken from Simone Pétrement's review of an unpublished, "confessional" statement written in all likelihood in 1934. Pétrement expresses some caution about the dating, indicating that it might have been in 1933 or, perhaps, written at various times. Weil mentions her age as twenty-five. See Simone Pétrement, SW, pp. 219-220.

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in a factory in order to restructure her habits.

In this most extraordinary document which offers an austere self-diagnosis, Weil demonstrates a side of herself that expresses an awesome impatience. She writes of five "temptations" which have dissuaded her from a responsible role and retarded her emotional and intellectual maturation. Her listing of these disabilities provides the first step in a cure.

> If you want to be cured, you must first of all become conscious of them. . . . Then, subject yourself to merciless control and correction . . . at twenty-five it is quite late: one should have begun at twenty-five months.[16]

Clearly, the objective assessment of her activities would belie such a personal scold but Simone Weil was certain that her greatest weakness was the "temptation of idleness." She wrote that she was not free of any of the five "but the only one I have not been able to overcome at all is idleness"—a habit she associated with escapism. Its prominence in her personality prompts her to list it at the head of her enumeration:[17]

> 1. The temptation of idleness. Flight from real life with its limitations, and from time, the essential limitation. Not to attempt anything that makes one aware that one isn't God . . .

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[16]Ibid., p. 220. Note that the same five appear in her Notebooks, passim.

[17]Weil writes how idleness produces "feelings of remorse and piercing despair."

2. The temptation of the inner life (all emotions that are not absorbed immediately by methodical thought and effective action). Put aside all actions that do not attain the object.
3. The temptation of domination. (Power has as its correlative fanatical obedience . . .)
4. Temptation of self-sacrifice (subordination to any object whatsoever, not only everything that is subjective but the subject itself; this comes from not being able beforehand to make the separation).
5. Temptation of perversity (reply [react] to evil by doing everything to increase it).[18]

The conquest of idleness would release Weil from her "panic" about time and foster a genuine connection with the orderly processes of the universe. She interpreted this act of self-control as essential to her survival; if the habits of "punctuality and constancy" could not become facets of her character she felt she would remain marginal to real life.

> You must live at least for a long time punctually, in order to find out what you are capable of. For without this, it would mean that you are not fit to be in the world—that you must die.
>
> But I have never begun to overcome this temptation of idleness in a stable fashion. To make resolutions is useless. To keep in mind, simply but continually, that if I do not rise above it, I would fail in my only ambition; I would live in a dream.[19]

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[18] The text appears in Pétrement, pp. 219-220 and concludes with a modest aside: "I really think this is all."

[19] Ibid., pp. 220-221. Pétrement's summary is well-taken (p. 222): "These pages exude energy, sincerity, the seriousness of a moral search stripped of all commonplaces. And one can see here Simone's supreme goal: it was not to live in a dream, to live in the truth, to be in the world."

Just as Weil discerned weaknesses in Marxism, she identified weaknesses in her personality—both required remedial action. The personal and the ideological came together as a serious commitment to study and apply oneself to the rigors of daily work. Serious intent propelled her behind the factory gate and into the disciplined rhythm of the workplace; there all self-delusions and wavering promises would be set aside.[20] This routine would provide relief from the indolent life Weil believed she had been leading.[21]

The choice of menial labor was not a negation of intellectual endeavor. On the contrary, Weil was very concerned with the balance between theory and practice and convinced that her Marxist compatriots had long since forgotten this equilibrium. Such balance did not mean the absorption of one activity by the other, or the neglect of manual activity for the more esteemed work of the mind. Marx's equation of manual and intellectual labor understood, according to Weil, involvement in both rather than the displacement of one by the other. But "many revolutionaries" had lost sight of the autonomy of each, had been

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[20]This is echoed in Weil's letter to her pupil: "What matters is not to bungle one's life. And for that one must discipline oneself." (Letter #5, 70 Letters, p. 14)

[21]The remark is made paranthetically and remains ambiguous as to whether it is an expectation of, or a judgment after her work in the factory: "(What a relief—work in the factory!)," Petrement, op. cit., p. 220.

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co-opted in their thinking by a bourgeois science that emphasized success and results in one's activity. Thus the Marxist, she averred, had departed from true science having become seduced by empiricism, whereas Marx, himself, remained a student of Descartes' science understanding that theory must not be shaped by desired outcome.[22]

> We should reflect that Marx's principal glory is to have rescued the study of societies not only from Utopianism but also and at the same time from empiricism. It seems clear to me that in Marx's study of society the relations between theoretical analysis, experiment, and application recall Descartes' conception of science . . .[23]

Marx and Descartes share a methodological perspective that, according to Weil, prohibits the free play of imaginative constructs and misleading aspirations in place of clarity and rigorous discernment.

A theoretical understanding of labor had engrossed Simone Weil prior to her employment at the Alsthom plant. Even during her years at the Ecole Normale the question of work had gained her attention. In 1929 she wrote and published two essays that give evidence of this philosophical orientation and indicate the general line of interest that would appear in her later, more descriptive, analysis.[24]

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[22]"The Teaching of Mathematics," 1932 draft of an article printed in On Science, Necessity . . ., pp. 71-74.

[23]Ibid., p. 72.

[24]"De la perception ou l'Aventure de Protée," in Libres Propos, No. 5 (1929) and "Du temps," Libres Propos, No. 8 (1929); the latter was originally prepared as a topo (short essay) for Alain. Note discussion of texts in

The first essay approaches work in terms of human method and purpose and argues that it is an indirect activity—a means to a means.

> Work, as opposed to reflection, persuasion, magic, is a series of actions that have no direct relation to either emotion or the goal pursued, or the former with the latter. Thus for a man who takes shelter in a cave and wishes to stop up the entrance with a large rock, the rule is first of all that the movements that permit him to do this have no relation to the spontaneous movements that, for example, cause him to fear ferocious beasts, and are even their direct opposites. Furthermore, when he has carried the rock halfway, the movement he must make is the same as if he had reached his goal; and at every moment of his work, his movements are thus alien to his finished movements, his planned movements, as well as to his desires . . .[25]

Weil's title is particularly instructive, referring to the elusive powers of Proteus, Homer's mythic figure whose form baffled his beholder. Those who sought Proteus found him in a variety of forms and could not seize the real self without concerted effort, patience and the actual grasping of Proteus. Weil regards the phenomenal world as equally elusive and ambiguous, susceptible to understanding only after work.

S. Pétrement, pp. 61-62 and J. Cabaud, op. cit., pp. 33-35. Cabaud's observation is relevant: "It is significant that this first printed essay by Simone Weil expressed such concern about the nature of labor, for it became one of her life's obsessions" (p. 34).

[25]Pétrement, ibid., p. 61.

> . . . Colours, sounds, dimensions can change, while the law of work, which is to be unceasingly indifferent to what has preceded and to what will follow never changes. Proteus can take this or that form at will, but the mind is not thereby freed from observing the same law in its activity and therefore from encountering the same matter. Qualities, forms and distances change, but the law of work remains the constant factor to which qualities, forms and distances serve only as signs. It is the very same law of exterior relations that defines space. For to see space is to grasp work's raw material, always passive, always outside one's self—as soon as space is formed, Proteus is conquered.[26]

The second article published in Libres Propos pursued the parallel between work, method and the experience of time. Here Weil attempted to explain work as the bridge across tense, the attainment of the future was secured through an extension of the self. She wrote that consciousness was awakened by the act of work: "It is by this law of time as a form of work that, in every sense impression I am aware of the existence of the world."[27] This essay and the earlier emphasize work as a methodological extension of self but reject the usual understanding of work as a linear movement from intention to accomplishment. Work is indirect action that concerns itself with means. A lyrical affirmation of manual labor brings the second essay to a conclusion and foreshadows the experience of the laborer as instrument:

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[26]Quoted from J. Cabaud, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

[27]Ibid., p. 35.

> Let us then wake up anew to the world; that is, let us return to work and to perception, and not fail in courage to observe that rule by which alone what we are doing can truly be work, and what we feel, perception: let us humble our own bodies to the status of tools, and our emotions to the rank of signs.[28]

The relationship of perception and work continued to attract Simone Weil's attention as a subject worthy of philosophical analysis. She chose the subject of "Science and Perception in Descartes" for her diploma thesis and urged in her conclusion that the imagination be restrained.[29] That faculty, Weil argued, brought disorder and illusion into the understanding of reality. Geometry and physics are prescribed as models for pure thought, indicating how the treacherous imagination can be set aside.

> I am always double: on the one hand, the passive being who is subjected to the world, and, on the other, the active being who has a grip on it; geometry and physics lead me to conceive how these two beings can be joined, but they do not join them. Certainly I cannot unite them directly . . . but I can bring them together indirectly, since that is precisely what action consists of. Not this appearance of action by which the unchecked imagination leads me blindly to overturn the world by means of my disorderly desires, but true action, indirect action, action that conforms to geometry or, to give it its real name, work.[30]

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[28] Ibid.

[29] See "Science et Perception dans Descartes" in Sur la Science, Paris, pp. 9-99; this text and discussion refers to S. Petrement's review, op. cit., pp. 64-65.

[30] Petrement, p. 66 (Sur la Science, p. 83).

Here, as in her earlier writing about the nature of work, the intermediary character and rigorous application of self at labor are embraced as means to transcend the unruly, unlimited terrain of imagination. The methodological approach is grounded on geometry, that "daughter of labor's fortitude."[31] Work functions, then, as a bridge between the fixity of the world and an active, knowing self.[32]

Imagination is attacked by Weil in these earlier explorations as well as her later writings for its conservative consequences. In the case of labor reform it serves, through the blind but benevolent desires of sympathetic outsiders, to retard progress. After having been in the inside of the factory, she asks: "How abolish an evil without first having clearly perceived in what it consisted?"[33] Fictional accounts may approximate the suffering of the worker but writings such as that of Jules

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[31]The phrase concludes Weil's essay "Du temps." Geometry is praised in the preface to Weil's thesis for the certainty it brings to human thought. Thales and Plato are named—the latter is said to have written that God is the eternal Geometer. The same notion is written in Greek at the head of the essay.

[32]Weil writes that "reason knows the world and seizes hold of unchecked imagination through work" (Sur la Science, p. 83). Petrement concludes that the diploma thesis is further evidence of Weil's "praise of work. It was to this that the entire essay tended; it was written to show that science whose method is based on manual work is truer than the science of the modern experts, which disdains certain common notions and is based completely on abstract analysis" (p.66).

[33]"Factory Work," Dec. 1946 Politics, pp. 369-78; written originally as "Experience de la vie d'usine" and published in Economie et humanism, 1941, under the anagram Emile Novis; see C.O., pp. 241-59.

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Romains do not cut very deep. And the hollow responses of the workers cannot be taken as an accurate description of their working circumstances.

> Workingmen do not find it very easy to write, speak, or even reflect on such a subject [worker dissatisfaction], for the first effect of suffering is the attempt of thought to escape. . . . Thus, when workingmen speak of their lot, they repeat more often than not the catch words coined by people who are not workingmen.[34]

And the irony for Weil is that these catch words and slogans have been created by activists who have never engaged in menial labor. Thus, the circularity of the illusion perpetuates false hope and a questionable assessment of the material basis for change. She confided to her friend Albertine Thévenon that her preconceptions about factory life were not necessarily wrong but that there was an "abysmal difference" between the real and imagined situation. She added that this realization only furthered her distrust of Marxist enthusiasts. How could they construct theories without first having applied themselves —as minds and bodies—to the genius of the materialist method?

> Only when I think that the great Bolshevik leaders proposed to create a free working class and that doubtless none of them—certainly not Trotsky, and I don't think Lenin either—had ever set foot inside a factory; so that they haven't the faintest idea of the real conditions which make servitude or freedom for the workers—well, politics appears to me a sinister farce.[35]

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[34] Ibid., p. 369.

[35] "Letter #6," 70 Letters, 1935, p. 15.

The decision to begin factory work in 1934 was not a capricious one; all of Simone Weil's intellectual and political activities seemingly led up to this.[36] Her theoretical speculations had resulted in a firm conviction about the viability of the materialist method, had isolated work as the central issue in her study of oppression and freedom. But the essays composed between 1929 and 1934—some academic, some addressed to her radical colleagues—while reinforcing the need for concrete investigation of the conditions of capitalism also prompted a sense of impasse. Abstractionism and polemic emerged as the two sides of the study of labor but neither approach was acceptable to Weil. She identified her vocation as that of reducing obfuscation and illusion, as one concerned with the discovery of truths, no matter the consequences.[37]

Simone Weil's decision to live and work among the French proletariat was not one of an adventurer either.[38]

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[36]See S. Pétrement, op. cit., p. 204 who reports, however, that Weil had hoped to secure factory work as early as 1931 but was unable to do so because of massive unemployment in that year.

[37]In a letter addressed to a factory manager in 1936 Weil reiterates this commitment to truth: " . . . there is nothing I want so much as to confront my ideas with facts. I assure you that intellectual honesty is always in my eyes the first of obligations" (Letter #16, 70 Letters, p. 48).

[38]Several of Weil's critics have remarked on her continuity with respect to the factory work decision, rejecting the argument offered by others that this commitment represented a break in her life, a veritable departure from political life which takes her toward an inner, less

She had grown impatient with both communists and syndicalists because of their optimism about revolution and the vision of a healthy economy wherein the capitalist no longer owned the means of production. Her reading of Marx fixed on his criterion of a scientific socialism and this required adherents of all shades to apply themselves to rigorous analysis based on facts. Dreams and promises, she insisted, only fostered greater oppression and separated the worker further from a liberated destiny.

Neither an unconscious elitism nor a missionary zeal impelled Weil to join the rank and file of laborers at Alsthom's. She struggled before the taxing machinery as one more piece-rate worker concerned with a quota and longing to avoid the harsh reprimands of the bosses. This is not to say that she was so thoroughly assimilated to her job that the goals for analysis were set aside or that she held the same general job objectives as her co-workers. Rather, she did not feel superior or prepared to serve as a

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active, stance. See M. Narcy, Simone Weil, malheur et beauté, Paris, 1967, who emphasizes the extension of her commitment to demystify certain realities into the factory. However, he notes that she lost her commitment to radical politics precisely because it lacked interest in the genuine circumstances of labor (p. 101). Note F. Heidsieck, Simone Weil, Paris, 1965, p. 33: "Her thesis, that of service to truth and the struggle for liberty" continued uninterrupted in "word and action." See, by contrast, J. Colombel's article, "Simone Weil et la condition ouvrière," Vol. 8 La nouvelle critique (Feb. 1956). In this denunciation of Weil the author cites the transitory character of her work commitment.

self-appointed (though unsolicited) teacher. Her desire to rid herself of the five "temptations" explains a good part of the decision to labor without privilege. This personal mission intended to rid her of bad personal habits served to strengthen her objective commitment to undertake scientific inquiry about work conditions.

She entered the Alsthom plant armed with ah objective goal and a subjective impulse; both meshed in a perspective that disdained illusion. Neither her day-dreams nor the Marxist promise of a better society could stand unchallenged. Toward the end of her factory experience she wrote to her mentor Alain about the possibilities of integrating work and knowledge with a study of perception—a true science project which, unlike modern abstract science, would not have "lost its soul."

> What is interesting is the perception of the man at work; and this implies a thorough study of the instruments of labour no longer from the technical point of view—in their relation to matter, that is—but from the point of view of their relation to man, to human thought. It would be necessary to clarify and arrange in series all the relationships implied in the manipulation of all the instruments of labour—whether perceived vaguely by those who manipulate them, or perceived clearly by a few privileged workers higher up in the labour hierarchy , , .or, as most often happens, not perceived at all by anybody. Where these two studies meet there would be a true science of physics, or at least that part of physics concerned with the phenomena which are the material of human labour.[39]

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[39]"Letter #2," undated, 70 Letters, p. 3.

For all the fatigue and ennui she was to know during those trying months at the factory she never ceased to grasp the analytical issues.

Testimony From the Workroom

> Work is no longer done with the proud consciousness that one is being useful, but with the humiliating and agonized feeling of enjoying a privilege bestowed by a temporary stroke of fortune, a privilege from which one excludes several human beings by the mere fact that one enjoys, in short, a job.[40]

As each day passed on the job at Alsthom's, Simone Weil learned the degrading lessons of humiliation in the course of earning a livelihood. When she had written in her "Testament" of the loss of work's meaning in modern society she had only surmised how it would feel to be dependent upon a factory bureaucracy. In the weary jottings of her "Journal"—a veritable second testament of miscellaneous facts, sentiments and judgments about life in the factory—this experience of humiliating "privilege" takes on the color and depth of genuine anguish.[41]

Page after page of the "Factory Journal" records frenetic impatience to increase speed, to control gestures

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[40] "Reflections," O&L, p. 37.

[41] This daily log is collected in C.O. as "Journal d'usine," pp. 35-107, written between December 1934 and August 1935 it became the basic document from which Weil drew her examples in later writings including "Experience de la vie d'usine" (translated as "Factory Life," 1946 Politics), written in 1941 and collected in the same volume, pp. 241-259.

so that each motion will serve the process with the utmost economy. Innumerable calculations, tedious itemizations entered on almost every page are the bitter reminders of the hegemony of the production quota. Weil's constant return to the question of how many pieces were processed at a particular rate hammers a telling message into the reader's consciousness: all thought and activity is fixed upon the wage structure in relation to production goals.[42] In the repetitious tabulations included in this "Journal" we enter the piece-rate worker's obsessive concern with numbers. One example from Weil's study suffices:

Hours	Sous
1 hr. 1/4	1 fr. 85
2 hr. 1/2	7 fr.
1 hr.	1 fr. 80
1 hr. 1/4 +or-1/4	3 fr. 25
... 6 hr.	24 fr. 60
1 hr. 1/2	(?) 1 fr.
6 hr. 1/2	9 fr.
...	...[43]

Weil's frustration with herself and the system expresses itself in these arithmetic passages, written as if to keep the record clear about her resolution to overcome idleness. Indeed, the requirements of the job were such that her desire for "punctuality and constancy" could not be evaded, if she wanted, without losing her employment. We enter into the hectic milieu of the workroom through these fretful calculations.

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[43]"Journal," p. 44; note that the table is complete on this page but in the original goes on to estimate "un peu plus de 3 fr. 1'h."; among other tabulations, see p. 71, pp. 100-101.

She was paid for the number of pieces processed within a given time period, plus or minus advances made, debits rendered through broken or "muffed goodies." Weil barely kept her rate above the minimum salary, struggling to secure a rate of at least three francs but generally falling short of this. She greeted her efforts with exasperation and occasional ironic humor: "I am not able to make any appreciable progress in my salary"; "two francs fifty, that will not ruin the factory."[44] The payment system epitomized the arbitrary character of factory administration, determining the worth of a worker without resort to equitable or clearly defined standards. Before the second week had ended, Weil had discovered the capricious nature of Alsthom's salary system and noted with anger that the grievance process only deepened the laborer's sense of intimidation.

> When a worker believes herself to be a victim, she complains but this is a humiliating appeal in view of the fact that she has no rights and is entirely at the mercy of the chief's good will which, in large measure, expresses a personal estimation of the worker's value and his fancy.[45]

The trick, Weil observed, was to adopt an uninterrupted rhythm which would assure a steady flow of parts at a given

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[44]Ibid., p. 101 and p. 45 respectively; her rate seems to have stayed around 2 fr.50.

[45]Ibid., p. 39.

speed. This activity required dexterity and the physical control of an athlete.[46] It meant that the process must be memorized but not understood, that the least number of movements insured the greatest speed. Most significantly, the process—whether at the stamping press, the furnace, the milling machine (all locations to which she was assigned during the months of employment at three plants)—demanded that the mind be shut off. Thus, repetition appears again on the pages of the "Journal" in the context of steps, parts, methods; Weil struggled to overcome thought for the sake of speed.

> Arrived at an uninterrupted rhythm only by midday . . . while continually repeating for myself the list of operations (iron-bar—large hole-bar-direction——iron-bar . . .), less again for me a matter of protecting myself from thoughtlessness than keeping myself from thought—condition of the greatest speed.[47]

The details repeated in the"Factory Journal" offer the implicit sense of frenzy, of the pressures of production and the pace of the laborer's activity. They provide, as well, the facts and figures Weil set out to collect as part of her scientific investigation of capitalist labor. Little escaped her purview, diagrams of machinery and drawings of the pieces supplement the verbal record.[48] In spite of her commitment to objective observation in applying

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[46]See p. 40 where she writes of the "relationship of work with athletism."

[47]Ibid., p. 66.

[48]See pp. 60, 81, 100, and 103 for example.

the materialist method, each entry tells something of her mood. The prevalent tone is panic but it is modulated by the asides of delight in certain of her co-workers and the joy in mastering a machine.[49] Pétrement summarizes Weil's appetite for community and her genuine enthusiasm for new friends:

> Reading her journal, one realizes the interest she has in all human beings. She notes down everything she could learn about the life of her fellow workers, both men and women, and describes their behavior for herself. It is true that this was part of the inquiry she was making into the workers' condition, yet one can see that she looks around her with a clear-sighted sympathy not devoid of humor. One also sees what she usually is so good at concealing: her extreme sensitivity, her need for a benevolent, friendly, and fraternal environment.[50]

At the end of her first week and then again at the end of her employment at the Alsthom plant, Weil lists her co-workers as if a cast of actors in a drama. Short asides introduce some, others merely merit a mention of name or a cryptic description: "violinist," "admirer of Tolstoy." For a select few she writes a brief biographical paragraph. Many of these same actors reappear throughout the text, often as co-workers simply caught up in the action of the workroom. But certain of the persons are key figures, respected or warmly appreciated by the "Journal's" author.

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[49] Ibid., p. 105; having successfully changed a machine part without the help of others she writes: "Victory, better than speed."

[50] Pétrement, p. 247.

The timekeeper is consistently dismissed as a totally unsympathetic character, the foremen are appraised with some ambivalence, the women generally regarded as brash but several escape her critical eye and meet with her favor.

> Mouquet(chief of the shop) . . . . The most interesting is evidently Mouquet (Timekeeper: odious type, vulgar it seems with the women—flirting always with the most outspoken of them—timekeeper almost a hazard—I have never spoken to him. Pommera never thinks badly . . .
>
> Mouquet—sculptured head, tormented—almost monastic—always straining—"I will think it over tonight." Seen him cheerful only once.[51]

Pommera's story, she notes, is one of a worker born of parochial parents with a rural rearing whose experience with city life before the war was negligible. He advanced through the ranks, never having had a formal apprenticeship or education. Pommera prompts Weil to spend little time at rest before the machinery.[52]

Among those women with whom she had frequent contact, Mimi and Nénette seem to draw the greatest attention. Her elaboration follows:

> Mimi—26 years—married for 8 years to a sailor (knew him from Angiers) who had worked for Citroën for 2 years, currently unemployed although a good worker. Working in a textile factory in Angiers (at 11 frs. a day!). With A. after 6 years. After 6 months has acquired a rather rapid rhythm in order "to earn her keep"—in the course of which she wept after

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[51]"Journal," p. 75, also pp. 20-21. I have selected excerpts from her description rather liberally.

[52]Ibid., p. 77.

believing that she would never accomplish it. Worked now for 1½ years, rather quickly and well, in a state of perpetual nervousness (fear of making errors) . . .

One of her principal reflections (I had told her of my exasperation with the ignorance I had about what I did): "One takes us for machines . . . others are there to think for us . . ." (exactly Taylor's words but with bitterness) . . .

Incomparably less common than the average.

Nenette (Mrs. A., about ? 35 years. Son of 13, daughter of 6½ years. Widow. Pleasantries and confidences such as to make a guardhouse blush, informing almost all of her conversation. Vivacious and extraordinarily energetic. Good worker; almost always earns more than 4 fr. In the shop for 2 years.

But—immense respect for education (speaks of her children "always in the process of reading.") Her rather vulgar gaiety disappears the week when she is frequently stopped: "It is necessary to count sou by sou."

Says of her children: "The idea of sending them to the workshop, I do not know what that would do to me." (But a superficial observer would believe that she is happy in the shop.)[53]

The foremen—Mouquet, Jacquot, and Robert—at Alsthom's are regarded as basically kind and helpful but Leon is otherwise; he chides her and makes her fearful of asking for explanations or assistance. At Carnaud, Forges de Basse-Indres, her second and very brief factory job, little mention is made of her co-workers and the foreman is unfavorably compared to Mouquet—the former, a

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[53]Ibid., pp. 76-77.

[54]Ibid., pp. 62-63.

man who "seems to want to possess the laborers." At Renault, the last place of her tour of factory labor, LeClerc, the foreman is embraced as "tres gentil" and frequently appears in the diary as a truly considerate figure.

The women appear to accept Simone Weil without hesitation into their casual conversations during lunch or in the cloakroom but she feels some discomfort with their bawdy talk.

> Conversation at the break (I must note everything). In the suburban homes (sister of Mimi and Josephine). When Nénette is there, often there are only pleasantries and confidences that would cause a regiment of hussards to blush (cf. the "friend" who is a painter and coaxes her to sleep with him 3 times a day, morning, noon and night; who explains the difference between the accepted "technique" and another . . . as far as I understand it, the time that she does not spend in making love, she spends cooking and eating).[54]

While the lists of tasks and earnings convey the drama of production, Weil's depiction of her co-workers suggests something of the high theatre she experienced in this setting despite her quest for the real. So many of her descriptions read like stage instructions and here and there she writes of the "drama" and the "notable incidents" that constitute a routine day at the factory. She was, of course, thoroughly opposed to the imaginative element transporting her away from the concrete task yet the tragi-

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[54]Ibid., pp. 62-63.

comic is not excluded from her testimony. The circumstances of her reality transcended the frenzied moments at Alsthom's and Renault's. It would seem that so dehumanized was the milieu that the human scale is introduced as relief from the pressure and the toil. It is telling that a year after this gruelling activity she would propose to a factory manager that his plant newspaper include short versions of Greek tragedy within its pages for the workers. Her proposal to present Antigone to the readers was accepted for publication without revision and Weil chides her correspondent: "Antigone is by no means a moral tale for model children; but all the same I hope you won't go so far as to find Sophocles subversive . . ."[55]

The reality of her factory career was dramatic and intense, lasting less than eight months and taking her to three separate job locations.[56] At Alsthom's she seems to have been involved in the processing of iron bars principally and on several occasions she labored before the furnaces working with copper bobbins.

> I have been hired as a shearing-machine operator (that is, a worker on the power presses) in a factory that manufactures electrical equipment and is owned by a company whose managing director,

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[54]"Letter #17," 1936, p. 49.

[55]The first assignment at Alsthom's began on December 4th and ended the first week of April; the second job lasted barely a month and the third seems to have occupied her from the first week of June into the second week of August. Although this duration amounts to more than eight months, she lost time in January and then again in early Spring for reasons of health; she was

> a man with a broad and very understanding attitude,has good relations with Boris.[57]

She left that plant in early April having been laid off, perhaps because her friend (August Detoeuf, the director) could no longer cover for her lack of agility and progress. She did not work without interruptions; after the the first few weeks she suffered a severe ear infection and was obliged to recuperate for many weeks. She spent a good part of this period with her parents on holiday in Switzerland. After this short respite in the mountains she returned to work and by mid-March found that the experience was "crushing." During the brief interlude between jobs she maintained her "Factory Journal" and provides an exceptionally joyous description of her meeting with other unemployed "comrades" who made her feel like one of them.

> Wednesday (divine time) with two metal fitters —one of 18 and the other of 58 years . . . . All morning conversation extraordinarily free, easy going, at a level superior to the miseries of existence which are the predominant preoccupation of slaves, certainly of the women. After Alsthom, what relief! . . . The younger one asks me: "And you, what is your passion? Embarrassed, I respond "reading," And he: "Yes—I see that, but not novels—rather philosophy, right?" We spoke then, of Zola and Jack London . . .

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unemployed for a short time between the first and second jobs and for a full month between the second and third positions.

[57]The text of her letter to Nicolas Lazarévitch (March 1935) from which this passage is taken is available only in the Pétrement text, pp. 234-235. The reference to Boris is to their common friend Boris Souvarine who introduced Weil to Detoeuf.

> Total comaraderie. For the first time in my life. No barrier, either in class difference (since it is suppressed) or sexual difference. Miraculous.[58]

Her next job was at Carnaud, Forges de Basse-Indre; its environment immediately oppressed her. She forces herself to work very quickly on the first day to meet the quota but fails; however, she is told to return the next day. Her mood sharply contrasts with that on meeting her two comrades of the previous week. In spite of the aching weariness after her day's labor, she walks along the Seine and thinks of suicide.

> Despite my fatigue, I have such need of fresh air that I stroll to the Seine, seat myself on a stone, dejected and my heart heavy with impotent rage. I feel emptied of all sense of my vitality. I ask myself whether, if I were condemned to this life, I would come each day to the Seine and not throw myself in one time.[59]

Her efforts at the stamping press overwhelmed her and after a month she was fired from this workshop which she depicted as "filthy," "a jail"; no explanation was given her for this decision.

The next weeks were frustrating ones which saw Simone Weil at the hiring offices of a number of factories in the vicinity

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[58]Ibid., pp. 79-80; although she had written to her pupil about being with <u>real</u> men earlier, the fact is that most of her work was done alongside women whose conversations she frequently found vacuous or raucous. The stimulation of this conversation is of signal importance with respect to her conclusion that unskilled labor dulled the worker and skilled workers were able to preserve a modicum of intellectual interest in the world.

[59]Ibid., pp. 81-82.

of Paris—all to no avail. Her days, filled with commuting from one end of the city to the other and standing in lines with the expectation that a job would soon be hers, passed without event. She finally decided to limit her expenditures to 3 francs 50 a day in order to economize, a decision which forced her to eat less and walk more. Weighing the pain of work against that of hunger, she wrote in her "Journal" that the latter took a greater toll.[60]

She secured a job at the Renault plant on June 5th and entered the new factory with considerable trepidation.

> If I have ever been frightened, it was on that day. I have thought only of a shop of presses, the ten hours a day, a brutal foreman and cut fingers, heat and my headaches . . .[61]

Much to her surprise and relief she was assigned to a milling machine. Although she had had some anxiety about this machine, having heard of the serious injuries it had caused to her co-workers, she adapted easily to the task.

Her plan seems to have been to stay at Renault's for the minimal trial period of a month but, enduring fatigue and several injuries, she stayed until August. She records this period of work with bitterness: a painful succession of work shifts, broken machinery,

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[60]Ibid., p. 86: "Hunger becomes a permanent sentiment. Is it more or less painful than working and eating? An unresolved question . . . .Yes, more painful, all in all."

[61]Ibid., p. 86.

inefficiencies on the job that throw her off pace and a nagging exhaustion.

At the conclusion of her factory labors a new person did not emerge in spite of these long months of monotonous labor. She left physically weaker, her morale fragile but the determination that brought her to this effort remained unshaken. She was yet to reshape her personal observations into an analysis of work and a program for reform. She had hoped to subdue her "temptations" through intense effort; she succeeded. Not only was she obliged to keep a punctual routine but her work required a vigilance that she had never before experienced nor would she again. What preparation she may have secured through earlier manual labors simply proved inadequate.[62] Writing to Lazarevitch she explains her lack of dexterity in meeting the quotas:

> We work at piece-rates, the rates are very tough, as is normal in a period of economic crisis; nothing in my past life has prepared me for this sort of effort, and shearing is, I think, one of the hardest jobs that women do. I am still far from the fixed rates, which, besides, are very often almost

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[62] See Pétrement, *passim* for a discussion of these odd jobs which included potato-digging for ten hours a day at her aunt's farm during the summer of 1929, assisting two fishermen during the summer of 1931 at Reville and participating in occasional farm work and doing tasks at a paint factory during the 1932-33 academic term at Auxerre. Of course none of these jobs required the same kind of commitment as the factory period where her living depended upon her serious involvement.

> impossible to attain, even for the good worker, since the timing is not based on common sense, yet there is an average I should reach and I haven't as yet . . .[63]

Her earlier experiences provided none of the physical training that might have helped her adjust to the exacting demands of the piece-rate system. Again in a letter she confides, after her first month's work at Alsthom's:

> I have learnt in the factory how paralyzing and humiliating it is to lack vigour, dexterity, sureness of eye. And in those respects, unfortunately for me, one can never make up for what one didn't acquire before the age of 20.[64]

But she did not regard herself as hopelessly molded into a fixed shape and disposition in spite of her poor stamina and physical strength. In fact she perceived her body and spirit to be malleable, reporting with a hint of pleasure in her "Journal" that a friend found her face to have a "tougher" look after months in the factory.[65] To Albertine Thévehon she tells how the job has hardened her and proven her to be adaptable.[66]

Fatigue and disgust haunt the pages of her diary—these feelings prevail even away from the machinery.

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[63] Pétrement, p. 235.

[64] "Letter #5," 1935, p. 14.

[65] "Journal," p. 93.

[66] "Letter #6," 1935, p. 16; "My capacity for adaptation is almost unlimited, so that I am able to forget that I am a "qualified lecturer" on tour in the working class, and to live my present life as though I had always been destined for it . . . and as though it would last forever and was imposed upon me by ineluctable necessity instead of my own free choice."

> Fatigue and disgust. Feeling of having been a free person for twenty-four hours (Sunday) and having to readapt to a servile condition. Disgust for the sake of 56 centimes, forcing myself to stretch and worn out by the certainty of a reprimand or for slow action or for bungling the job . . . . Vertigo of speed. (Above all, in order to speed up it is necessary to vanquish fatigue, headaches, a sense of discouragement.)[67]

The headaches and dizziness were exacerbated by the high speeds she was forced to maintain. In describing her work at the second factory, she tells of her exhaustion after attempting to meet the required output and failing to do so.

> I was at the same job for an hour and by making even greater efforts I got up to just over 650. Then I was given various other jobs, always with the same instruction, namely, to go at full speed . . . . If you are changing from one job to another, or looking for a container, it is always on the double . . . . And only today the foreman took the place of one of the women at this belt and kept her machine working full speed for ten minutes (which is easy if you can rest afterwards) to prove to her that she should work even faster.[68]

No rest was possible for Weil—she carried the pressures with her after work and far into the night, often experiencing insomnia, eczema and severe headaches.[69]

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[67]"Journal," p. 40.

[68]"Letter #7," pp. 17-18; see also "Journal," pp. 61 & 65.

[69]Note that she distinguishes herself from those hardier workers who could shake off the weight between shifts. She "Letter #11," 1936, p. 31; "Journal," p. 67.

Having to be constantly alert and nimble increased the strain and the severity of her headaches during the day. There was no let up. When she allowed herself to be briefly distracted, she learned how costly this could be—mistakes and broken machinery were the consequence. Writing of the "disastrous incident" at Renault's where she forgot herself and became involved in a short reverie: "At that precise moment I place a piece which is too thick for cutting . . ., that night pas dormi (no sleep)."[90]

The safety and health of the workers at each of the plants was also scrutinized by Weil. Clearly noise pollution added to her personal pain but she saw that it jeopardized the well-being of others as well. Weil notes sympathetically that she knows the suffering of an Italian woman who loses time on the job because her liver ailment makes her susceptible to "headaches which the noises of the factory render intolerable."[71] Her own headaches produce loss of appetite and vomiting. However, on one occasion, the "infernal noise," however, created a "truly curious impression."

> The noises of the factory, which are certainly significant (the hammering of the coppersmith, the hammers . . .) causes at the same time a profound sense of moral joy and physical sorrow.[72]

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[70]"Journal," p. 98; she exclaims in Greek "ὀτοτοτ!"

[71]Ibid., p. 63; she writes: "je connais ça!"

[72]Ibid., p. 55.

The lack of sanitary safeguards and hazardous ventilation are recorded. The temperature of the workroom at Alsthom's varies—from blasts of hot to cold air which serve to irritate the bronchial condition of one worker.[73] At the Forges de Basse-Indre, the "atmosphere is stifling, charged with odors of paint and varnish."[74]

These conditions underlie the disgust and ennui Weil experiences on the job. In a sense, the fatigue is not half so bad as the arbitrary rules and orders imposed upon the day laborer.[75] Sexist attitudes in hiring and assigning work positions perpetuate the basic division between skilled male and unskilled female workers.

> For a man, if he is very skilled, very intelligent, and very tough, there is just a chance, in the present conditions of French industry, of attaining to a factory job which offers interesting and humanly satisfying work . . . . But as for women, they are restricted to purely mechanical labour, in which nothing is required of them except speed.[76]

The women work at foot presses which apparently invite pain and permanent injury to the foot.[77] But, as Weil observes, they must tolerate these discomforts and hardships for, as one of her co-workers stated: "It is necessary to be more conscientious <u>when one has to earn a living</u>."[78]

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[73]Ibid., p. 47.

[74]Ibid., p. 81.

[75]See Weil's discussion in "Letter #23," 1936, pp. 55-56.

[76]"Letter #5," 1935, p. 11.

[77]"Letter #7, p. 18.

[78]"Journal," p. 38, Weil's emphasis.

These conditions are not conducive to friendly communication or the creation of trusting relationships.[79] Among many of the women Weil found a persistent jealousy and a lack of sympathy for another's poor luck. And the men show nothing but scorn for the women.

> (Note: separation of the sexes, contempt of the men for the women, reserve of the women for the men (in spite of the exchange of obscene pleasantries), rather more pronounced among workers than elsewhere.)[80]

Weil's job at the Renault plant was dependent upon her femininity, according to Pétrement, who tells of helping Weil make herself up after they had heard that the hiring boss was partial to pretty women. It worked![81]

Disgust with having to work at impossible speeds for an inadequate wage was commonplace among men and women. Generally the latter were responsible to the former who functioned in various supervisorial roles including time-keeper, machine-setter and foreman. And what constantly broke the spirit was the humiliating retorts of the foreman from which there was no recourse. Rage and bitterness prevailed in the workroom, as did sorrow that there was no appropriate target for one's frustration:

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[79]Weil singles out the skilled worker as the more supportive and friendly type, giving further strength to her conclusions about the anti-social consequences of monotonous labor; see "Letter #6," 1935, p. 16.

[80]"Journal," p. 83.

[81]Pétrement, p. 240.

> One dare not be insolent to the foremen, and, moreover, they very often don't even make one want to be. So one is left with no possible feeling about one's own fate except sadness.[82]

The sorrow at having no options or power in the factory nourished a sense of stupor among Weil's companions and she, too, struggled to remain a thinking human.

> In this situation, the greatness of soul which allows one to despise injustice and humiliation is almost impossible to exercise. So much so that, on the contrary, many apparently insignificant things—clocking in and out, and showing one's identity card (at Renault's), the pay procedure, any slight reprimand—are felt as profound humiliations because they remind one of one's situation and make it palpable . . .
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> The only way not to suffer is to lapse into unconsciousness; and there are many who yield, in one way or another, to this temptation. I often did so myself. I do not say it is impossible to retain the lucidity, self-responsibility, and dignity appropriate to a human being; but it means condemning oneself to a renewed fight every day against despair.[83]

All was not tedium and heavy toil during those days of factory labor. Simone Weil writes of lighter moments in the course of the experience including the follies of bureaucrats—their red tape and confused authority. On one occasion a "very funny series of events" transpired to convince her of the absurdity of specialization. Sent by the foreman in search of ten missing washers, she merely adds to the bungling of various chiefs and wastes an inordinate amount of time on an unsuccessful mission.[84]

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[82]"Letter #6," p. 16.

[83]"Letter #23," pp. 56-57.

[84]"Journal," p. 47; see Cabaud's brief treatment, p. 107.

On another occasion her mistakes in shaping a part prove inadvertently to be in order—much to the surprise of her immediate supervisor. There were outings during the week-end that brought Weil brief respite from her week-long duress: an Italian art show, an exhibition of the Jacquard loom (for which she had an enormous enthusiasm and delighted in the knowledge of the weaver).[85] But the ironic humor and the short outings did little to mitigate the overriding sense of constraint conveyed throughout the "Factory Journal."

She had taken up factory labor in pursuit of the real but much of the experience defied realistic expression, requiring her to resort to imaginative interpolations. A year after she had resumed teaching, she communicated something of this problem to the director at Alsthom's, suggesting that he see Charlie Chaplin's film "Modern Times" in order to fully grasp her meaning. In that film a "feeding-machine" appears on the screen which she asserts is "the most perfect and truest symbol of the workers' position in the factory."[86]

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[85]Ibid., p. 80. Weil notes that she understands at last the process and the relationship of card, needles and fiber. The weaver explains to her that each textile mill retains such artisans to make samples but that this practice will soon disappear. She comments that this work appears effortless and such knowledge is surely a source of pride.

[86]"Letter #23," p. 58; note that Garson uses the same imagery from Chaplin's film as a title for her first chapter (see footnote #88, infra, for full reference).

Her frustration with the limits of language did not prompt her to abandon her project to observe and analyze the conditions of "reality." The "Factory Journal" stands as a testimony to her triumph in this respect. Hannah Arendt writes that it is "perhaps no exaggeration to say that Simone Weil's La Condition ouvrière (1951) is the only book in the huge literature on the labor question which deals with the problem without prejudice and sentimentality."[87] In the years since Arendt's enthusiastic assessment there has been an extraordinary interest in the circumstances of the worker's life and numbers of excellent "exposure" studies have been published.[88] However, her judgment remains rightfully unchallenged.

Weil regarded her effort as generally successful, if not radically significant, in re-shaping her person.

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[87]Arendt, p. 131 (ftnte 83); Camus has referred to the document as a "noble achievement."

[88]Among the titles see: Richard Balzer, Clockwork, Life in and outside an American Factory, N.Y., Doubleday, 1976; Kenneth Lasson, The Workers, N.Y., Bantam, 1971; William O'Rourke, ed. On the Job, N.Y., Vintage, 1977 and Göran Palm, The Flight from Work, N.Y., Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977; see also for the question of women and work: Barbara Garson, All the Livelong Day: The Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work, N.Y., Doubleday, 1975; Nancy Seifer, Nobody Speaks for Me, N.Y., Simon and Schuster, 1976; Jean Tepperman, Not Servants, Not Machines, Boston, Beacon Press, 1976. Note that the best bibliography to be found on working women is appropriately entitled Nowhere to be Found, by Victoria Samuels for the N.Y. Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity (Am. Jewish Congress), 1975. Certainly Studs Terkel's Working, N.Y., Random/Pantheon, 1972, has become a classic at this point. There are films and photography books that also seek to expose the working conditions of modern life: "Harlan County" is a remarkable cinema verité account of coal mining, and Bill Owens', Working, I Do It For the Money, N.Y., Simon and Schuster, 1977 represents an excellent photographic commentary.

> I suffered a lot from those months of slavery, but not for anything in the world would I have avoided them. They enabled me to test myself and to touch with my finger the things which I had previously been able only to imagine. I came out very different from what I was when I went in—physically worn out, but morally hardened . . .[89]

She had entered the factory determined to perceive the truths of industrial production, put them in the context of the materialist method and undertake an analysis faithful to the tenets of an authentic "scientific socialism." She had approached this work in the hopes of vanquishing her "temptations," especially the temptation to idleness. There can be little doubt that the demands of the job allowed no slack in a routine of "punctuality and constancy." But at least one critic looks upon Weil's efforts with disapproval; Colombel finds that Weil was inspired by "adventurism" which precluded a scientific investigation of the reality she alleged to be documenting.[90] Weil is charged with prejudice toward her subject and a fixity toward the views she expounded in her "Testament."

> Her experience was insensitive to force, power and the perspectives of the working class, seizing on the insurmountable character of the slave's situation, and the necessity of accepting the same.[91]

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[89] "Letter #8," 1935, pp. 19-20.

[90] Jeanette Colombel, "Simone Weil et La Condition ouvrière," passim.

[91] Ibid., p. 55.

Criticism of this ilk had been predicted by Weil's syndicalist friends of St. Étienne prior to being hired at Alsthom's. Albertine Thévenon explains in her introduction to La Condition ouvrière that she had nothing but disdain for those sons of the coal mine owners who work incognito for a short duration to gain experience before returning to their privileged lives. Her reservations were shared by "three or four companions" who expressed their disaffection from Weil's project "crudely and perhaps even brutally." But Weil was not to be dissuaded.

> If we were generally right, we were in error concerning Simone. Above all, she took up the experience seriously and with the greatest integrity, isolating herself from her family, living the same material conditions as those of her companions in the workroom.[92]

The letters and articles reporting her experiences convinced Albertine Thévenon of Weil's capacity for "adaptation and her power of 'attention' . . . which allowed her to know with acuity" the suffering of workers, particularly that of her unskilled sisters.

Not insensitive to the question of her credibility, Weil justifies the depth and sincerity of her involvement to another factory manager in 1936. Referring to the daily struggle to keep her sense of dignity, she assures her correspondent that she scrupulously avoided self-deception.

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[92]"Avant-Propos," C.O., p. 11.

> It would be easy and pleasant to deceive myself a little and forget all that. It would have been easy not to feel it at all, if I had undertaken the experience as a sort of game, like an explorer who goes to live among remote tribes but without ever forgetting his difference from them. But I did the opposite. I systematically eliminated everything which could remind me that the experience was a sort of experiment.[93]

Simone Weil's factory experience will probably continue to spark debate about its authenticity and its relevance to the present conditions of working-class life. This is as it should be but the test of her contribution must be measured against what followed from those long and hard months of work. As Cabaud concludes: "An accurate evaluation will have to consider the fruits it was to bear."[94] For this particular analysis, the fruit is both the rudiments of a reform program for factory labor and the content of a theology of work.

Malheur—The Essence of Slavery*

> The chief fact is not that of suffering, but of humiliation.[95]

Upon ending her commitment to factory work, Simone Weil wrote a melancholy summary of what these months of laborious activity had meant for her.

> What did I gain from this experience? The feeling that I possess no rights, whatever

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[93]"Letter #11," 1936, pp. 30-31.

[94]Cabaud, p. 114.

[95]"Journal," p. 106.

*Weil writes in her Notebooks, Vol. 1, p. 3 that malheur is an "admirable word, without its equivalent in other languages."

> they may be, to anything whatever (attention to nothing kills it). The ability to be morally sufficient, to live in this state of perpetual, latent humiliation without feeling humiliation in my own eyes, of tasting intensely each moment of liberty or comradeship as if it was eternal. A direct contact with life . . .[96]

Her objective to abandon the phantoms of imagination was secured but at a terrible personal cost. She continues her self-evaluation:

> I avoided being shattered. I almost was—my courage, the feeling that my dignity was a bit broken during a period where even the memory humiliates me—if it was merely my experience the memory would not be worth preserving. I awoke in anguish, I went to the factory in dread: I worked as a slave; the mid-day break was lacerating; returned home at quarter of six preoccupied with getting an adequate sleep (which I never did), and awakening too early. Time was an intolerable weight. The dread—the fear—of that which would follow never stopped oppressing me until Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning. And the object of the fear was the <u>orders</u>.[97]

She had remained at the grueling, poorly compensated labor because she believed that a solution to oppression would follow from direct participation. Her experience taught her otherwise; it was difficult enough to keep a hope alive during those months let alone a concrete alternative to oppression.

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[96] Ibid., see Petrement for quotation, pp. 243-4.

[97] Ibid., pp. 106-107 (Weil's emphasis); note also her "Letter #7," p. 18 for a similar expression of her reasons for persisting in labor.

> The feeling of personal dignity such as society fabricates is shattered. It is necessary to forge another (but exhaustion has effectively blocked consciousness from its proper function to think!). Must force myself to preserve this other.[98]

Perhaps the experience of being driven from thought was the most debilitating for Simone Weil. She wrote of the irony of having been formerly paid to think and, while at the factory, paid not to think. This realization prompted her to distinguish between physical and moral suffering and to grasp the fact that she had only known the former (her fierce headaches) prior to her daily bouts with impatient shop stewards, noisy and unsafe machinery, arbitrary and humiliating orders. During this factory period she began to consider a theoretical scheme which understood moral pain as an affliction from which there was no respite. In an early formulation of this insight she wrote of the distinctiveness of Greek tragedy in having seized upon true humiliation; she contrasted this with Racine's drama which failed to disclose this wretchedness.

> It is always the arrogant who are humiliated in Racine . . . . It is the self-respecting in Homer, Sophocles . . . it is clear that Racine's Andromachus never carried water or wove cloth from wool. It is a very different matter when one is humiliated by a foreman . . .

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[98]Ibid., p. 107. Weil's emphasis.

> Power. Its expression, its degrees, the profound transformation which it works on the soul. Captain and sailor . . . Chief of the workroom (Mouquot) and worker . . . [99]

According to Weil, the French dramatist lived a relatively sheltered life, unfettered by affliction. Consequently his plays reflect a "coldness," an unconvincing portrayal of suffering. The Greek tragedians, by contrast, portrayed simple people whose lives were crushed by an external destiny that cannot be tempered.

Although this aside about tragic theatre was an early and tentative expression of Weil's concern with malheur (affliction), it bears the seeds of a theory later developed that builds upon victimization as a direct experience. Her essay on affliction, written only a year before her death, returns to the question of authentic knowing and compassion for the afflicted and concludes that a void appears in place of consciousness.[100] To have escaped affliction or to have experienced it often leads, she asserts, to amnesia or indifference: affliction is an impossible, unthinkable reality.

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[99] "Fragments," in C.O., p. 120.

[100] See "The Love of God and Affliction," Ch. 16 On S.N.L., pp. 170-198. She writes that affliction "is impossible. It is not possible to know affliction without first having been through it" (p. 187).

> When thought finds itself, through the force of circumstance, brought face to face with affliction it takes immediate refuge in lies, like a hunted animal dashing for cover. Sometimes in its terror it burrows very deep into falsehood and it often happens that people who are or have been in affliction become addicted to lying as a vice, in some cases to such a degree that they lose the sense of any distinction between truth and falsehood in anything.[101]

Affliction cannot be comprehended nor does it generate feelings of compassion. Weil avers that those who have been so affected generally lose all sense of another's pain; only a miracle prompts the sufferer to console another. Slavery is the consequence of this horrific condition where half the soul has been seized, leaving neither a consciousness of "the cause of persecution" nor a sense of individual being.[102] One is a victim to "the blind mechanism" of necessity which transforms a person into an undifferentiated sufferer.

> If the mechanism were not blind there would not be any affliction. Affliction is above all anonymous; it deprives its victims of their personality and turns them into things. It is indifferent, and it is the chill of this indifference—a metallic chill—which freezes all those it touches, down to the depth of their soul. They will never find warmth again. They will never again believe that they are anyone.[103]

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[101] Ibid., p. 188.

[102] Weil writes in her NTBK, Vol. 1, p. 3 that the meaning of slavery is ambiguous, the ancients identifying the condition with an act of Zeus who "takes half the soul away from the man who becomes a slave."

[103] "Love of God," p. 175.

This persisting anguish distinguishes malheur from physical pain which passes in time, releasing the victim from the grip of aches and even memories of its presence. A toothache is endured, Weil asserts, because there is knowledge that it will subside and its discomfort soon forgotten. Not so with the victim of affliction who is seized by physical and spiritual suffering, fixed forever in its awesome hold. Weil expresses this state in a metaphor that takes its vocabulary from the artisan's world of work:

> When a hammer strikes a nail the shock travels, without losing any of its force, from the nail's large head to the point, although it is only a point. If the hammer and the nail's head were infinitely large the effect would still be the same. The point of the nail would transmit this infinite shock at the place where it was applied.
>
> Extreme affliction, which means physical pain, distress of soul, and social degradation, all together is the nail. The point of the nail is applied to the very centre of the soul, and its head is the whole of necessity throughout all space and time.[104]

Affliction begins with physical pain but it is "quite a different thing," passing through the flesh to the soul and marking the victim with the stamp of slavery. Imagination also produces suffering; its consequences are not debilitating because the mind is able to "turn itself away" from suffering.

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[104]Ibid., p. 182.

> Affliction is an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the attack or immediate apprehension of pain . . .
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> There is not real affliction unless the event which has gripped and uprooted a life attacks it, directly or indirectly, in all its parts, social, psychological, and physical. The social factor is essential. There is not really affliction where there is not social degradation or the fear of it in some form or another.[105]

Innocent victims are psychologically transformed, believing that their destiny has been justly determined in spite of a deep sense of bewilderment. Culpability for an unknown crime characterizes this aspect of affliction, Weil writes, forcing the victim to accept scorn and loathing. Job's plight exemplifies this twisted consequence; he is persuaded by his friends that their suspicions and judgments of guilt are well founded even though he does not grasp why. Guilt and self-hatred obsess the afflicted, eventually transforming into a disdain for others similarly stricken.

Calling out, time and time again, in anguish for the help of others, for relief from this searing affliction, only teaches the victim that such cries are unheard. No one will come to the rescue; isolation and rejection prevail. Weil refers to the injured hen in the barnyard to dramatize her case—the hen meets with revulsion and attack from the healthy hens; so, too, the afflicted human.

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[105]Ibid., p. 171.

She concludes, "everybody despises the afflicted to some extent, although no one is conscious of it."

Thus, the afflicted become poisoned by an "inertia" that causes impotence to act on their own behalf or that of others. Empathy cannot arise from this profound suffering and certainly not political rebellion against those "killers of souls" who have caused or nurtured this affliction. Is there any hope for amelioration? Will the afflicted finally find strength to throw off the yoke of slavery? Weil's unwavering response is affirmative—but not in the course of social justice. Hope lies on another, transcendent level.

> The soul has to go on loving in the void, or at least to go on wanting to love though it may be only an infinitesimal part of itself. Then, one day, God will come to show himself to this soul and to reveal the beauty of the world, as in the case of Job. But if the soul stops loving it falls, even in this life, into something which is almost equivalent to hell.[106]

The identification of affliction as a distinctive form of suffering effectively elevates the problem of pain in work to a moral plane. Affliction's reach—its connection with force and its resilience—leads Weil beyond traditional labor reform to a discussion of how to protect the worker from humiliation and how to heal the soul that has been crushed by oppression.

Weil's factory experience taught her the difference between physical and moral pain, her letters refer to her

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[106]Ibid., pp. 172-173.

struggle with both; the latter seized her with unexpected force but she writes that she was able to escape submission to its hold.

> I swore to myself I would not give up until I had learned how to live a worker's life without losing my sense of human dignity. And I kept my word. But up to the last day I found it was necessary to renew the struggle every day to keep that sense, because the conditions of life never ceased to undermine it and encourage a state of subhuman apathy.[107]

For Weil, the loss of human dignity was the loss of thought, the sense of becoming a thing which severed self from the warmth of human exchange.

> Exhaustion results in making me forget the very reasons for my sojourn in the factory, rendering almost invincible the strongest temptation which this life produces: that of no longer thinking, the only and sole means of not suffering from it. Only on Saturday afternoon and Sunday am I haunted by memories, scraps of ideas, that remind me that I am <u>also</u> a thinking being. The terror that seizes me in establishing my dependence or which finds me with respect to external circumstances . . . that which after all is always possible—and I would become a beast of burden, docile, and resigned (at least for me). Only the feeling of fraternity, indignity before injustices inflicted upon another—I am close to concluding that the health of a worker's soul depends, above all, on his physical constitution. I do not see how those who are not physically strong are able to avoid sinking into some form of despair—drinking, bumming, or crime, debauchery or simply, and more often than not, stupefaction.[108]

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[107]"Letter #11," to Mons. B, p. 30; see an almost identical text, "Letter #9," p. 22: "When I was kept away from work by illness I became fully aware of the degradation into which I was falling, and I swore to myself that I would go on enduring the life until the day came when I was able to pull myself together in spite of it. And I kept my word. Slowly and painfully, in and through slavery, I reconquered the sense of human dignity—a sense which relied, this time, upon nothing outside myself . . ."

[108]"Journal," pp. 51-52. (Weil's emphasis)

Weil's experience sadly confirmed her notions of historical progress as they were recorded in her "Testament." In that essay she asserted that technological innovation did not reduce the circumstances of harship and submission associated with primitive labor.

> The efforts of the modern worker are imposed on him by a constraint as brutal, as pitiless and which holds him in as tight a grip as hunger does the primitive hunter. . . . And as for the sequence of movements in work, that, too, is often imposed from outside on our workers, exactly as in the case of primitive men, and is as mysterious for the one as it was for the others . . .[109]

But the character of work's enslavement has not remained unchanged. The slave of antiquity was whipped into submission, the modern laborer succumbs to a slavery attached to the form of labor. Weil writes that in "all other forms of slavery, the slavery is in the circumstances." She adds that in modern life it is "carried into the work itself" and attacks the soul.[110]

Not governed by relationship of master and slave, a property relationship which can be transcended, the laborer of today is dominated by organization and technique.[111] The name given by Weil to this modern form of slavery is "rationalization." It encompasses bureaucratic co-ordination, piece-work, mass-assembly and the total

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[109]"Reflections," pp. 78-79.

[110]"Fragments," C.O., p. 124.

[111]Ibid: "Today, slaves absolutely enslaved without the Hegelian turning around."

separation of the planning and executing functions; it results in fatiguing mindless effort, the dizzying fragmentation of time and purpose, the dissolution of all capacity for sociability. A bizarre reconciliation of the human opposition between action and passivity is forged, Weil claims, through this afflicting process of rationalization. The factory laborer ceaselessly provides the energy necessary to production but remains passive with respect to both process and product.

In a talk delivered two years after Weil concluded her factory work she addressed a conference on the topic of rationalization, outlining its historical origins and the implications with respect to labor reform.[112] She posed, in this talk, the same question that led her into the factory: what circumstances permit the worker to produce effectively in a system that protects the humanity and well-being of the producers? She reiterates that this question has eluded scientific inquiry, adding that most social theorists were totally oblivious to the procedures that governed the work activity they sought to change.

> To my knowledge, it has not been studied by theorists of the workers' movement; neither Marx nor his disciples dedicated themselves to this effort and in Proudhon one discovers only indications in this regard. Perhaps the theorists were badly situated to study this problem, having never been just so many cogs in the factory.[113]

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[112]"Le Rationalisation," C.O., pp. 215-232; no text of the original talk was kept. This text is reconstructed from a listener's notes.

[113]Ibid., p. 216.

Marx had written, of course, about the relationship of the laborer to the machine, indicating that the earlier mastery of inert matter and the instruments of production had been turned around with the historical shift from manufacture to capitalism. Note that he wrote of this relationship and its conversion in terms of living and dead labor.

> Living labour must seize upon these things and rouse them from their death-sleep . . . . Bathed in the fire of labour, appropriated as part and parcel of labour's organism . . .
>
> But it is only in the factory system that this inversion for the first time acquires technical and palpable reality. By means of its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of labour confronts the labourer, during the labour-process, in the shape of capital, of dead labour, that dominates, and pumps dry, living labour-power.[114]

Weil had not disaffirmed Marx's account of conditions of modern slavery; hers was a critique of the alleged scientism of the inquiry with respect to transformation from the capitalist mode of production, the focus of the socialist upon capitalist property, and the dynamics of profit. Another oppression accompanies that of slave wages—that of prolonged suffering at work which is shaped by rationalization. This innovation to production alleges, she claims, to be scientific and beneficial when all the while it hastens the sense of "inferiority and slavery" among those who cannot even fight for a better wage.

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[114]Karl Marx, Capital, trans. Moore & Aveling, Moscow, Foreign Languages Pbl., 1954, Vol. 1, p. 183 & p. 422.

The fact that this system is labeled "rational" and "scientific" only contributes to its adoption among twentieth century capitalists. Weil explains that its reputation, unjustly made, facilitates the recruitment of engineers and industrial psychologists to its aid, rather than to a hard look at its horrendous consequences for the worker subject to its principles.[115] Even the union leadership is seduced by rationalization's so-called progress because of the "monomania" of bourgeois society, a condition which Weil describes as an addiction to the statistics of time and money. Thus these representatives of the laborer negotiate for reduced hours and increased wages without a thought to the basic arrangements that oppress the worker.

> Bourgeois society has attained a monomania; the monomania of accountability. For it, nothing has value which cannot be calculated by francs and centimes. It never hesitates to sacrifice human lives to numbers which look well on paper, the numbers of the national budget or the industrial balance sheets.
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> Oh well, it is an extremely grave void for the workers' movement, for there are other things besides the question of profits or of property in all the suffering endured by the working class as a consequence of capitalism.[116]

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[115] See Harry Braverman, Labor and Monopoly Capital, N.Y., Monthly Review Press, 1974 for a recent study of rationalization from a Marxist perspective. Braverman supports Weil's position on both counts: that earlier Marxists ignored the problem and that its alleged scientificity enticed students to contribute to its development unwittingly.

[116] "Rationalisation," op. cit., p. 217.

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The prestige of science and the general hope for a reasonable approach that would preclude worker revolution guaranteed that Taylor's system of rationalization would find few opponents in the capitalist system. Taylor, the American inventor of the approach in the late nineteenth century, assured the public that his innovation to productive process would result in great benefits for the entire population. The efficient worker would be rewarded with good wages, the output would assure cheaper goods and greater accessibility to all. Weil rejects his assurances as patently false. She notes that Taylor was not a scientist in the first place, that he was not devoted to the truth-giving results of such an endeavor. Moreover, the system does not deliver more consumer goods to the public. The rich benefit, she argues, because the system produces more luxuries and better armaments for war; she adds that rationalization found its popularity during the boom years of the First World War.[117] No promotion of the worker's status or a more humane work situation emerged from the institutionalization of Taylorism; its main purpose was to exploit human energy to its limit.

This lecture of Weil's on rationalization looked at Taylor's personality, discovering that his beginnings were those of a privileged class. He had little formal education and no training in science or engineering, nor

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[117]Ibid., pp. 228-229.

did he move through the rank and file of workers before attaining his status as a gifted innovator of systems. His exposure to work systems was through his "watchdog" activity as a youth for industry and he developed his obsession with wasted time into a theory and practice of maximizing human effort.

> He simply studied the most scientific procedures to utilize the machinery already in existence to its best capacity; not only the machine but humans. This was his obsession. He made his experiments in order to be able to tell the workers: "You have been wrong to make such work in an hour, it is necessary to make it in half an hour . . ."[118]

Taylor's method included the measurement of time to perform a given task, an analysis of elementary steps required and a study of the most efficient manner of assembling parts. The pace was set by selecting a prime worker, that is the fastest and strongest, and encouraging the same to work at top speed for a bonus. The effect of this parody on social Darwinism was to weed out all the slower, less dexterous workers who would fall below the minimum salary. The system is geared to the production of more, not better products and produces an intensified activity that pushes all to an exhausting level. The long-term effect of the system, Weil surmises, is life-robbing—consuming the health of each and every laborer. She contrasts these workers to the heroic runner of the Marathon who

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[118]Ibid., p. 223. "The idea of Taylor was that each person is capable of producing a maximum of predetermined labor."

pushed himself beyond all limit and died at the end of the race.

A fundamental distinction is drawn between authentically rational labor and the form imposed upon the laborer by Taylorism; the former entails a "means of workers' control and, at the same time, a method of simplifying work." But the development has been otherwise. Another American, Henry Ford, built upon Taylor's technique in the creation of the assembly-line which furthers the discipline over workers and emphasizes the role of supervision. The combination of the two schemes has brought about, she continues, the displacement of qualified and skilled workers with unskilled, untrained transient laborers, and severed the relationship between those who think and those who act. Such specialization creates a cadre of obedient slaves on the factory floor, who accept each order without thought, who develop a skill for docility. Unlike their predecessors who constructed the pyramids of ancient Egypt, they work free of physical constraint: "Taylor has replaced the whip with bureaus and experiments under the guise of science."

Weil's critique of rationalization points to the harshness of speed as an expectation and the wrenching alienation of all creative endeavor away from the laborer.[119]

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[119] Note her conclusion, "Letter #9," p. 22: "There are two factors in this slavery: the necessity for speed, and passive obedience to orders."

Thought is transformed into an undesirable faculty because its activity slows down production; it is surrendered to the bureaucrat. Repetitious labor requires little, if any training, transforming individual selves into an amorphous army of interchangeable workers. The moral consequences of these transformations is incalculable. Weil reviews this reality with pained accuracy:

> And another unacceptable kind of subordination is that in which all the intelligence, ingenuity, will, and professional conscience are in the instructions elaborated by the superior, while the executant has only to obey passively, with his mind and his heart totally uninvolved. In such a situation the subordinate is almost like an inert object used as a tool by the intelligence of another . . .[120]

The division of labor which creates bureaucrats who know the secrets of the process and control their outcome and workers who are continually mystified in and by their effort is firmly denounced by Weil. In the heart of the factory "reside those who plan and co-ordinate; the rest of the organization is populated by an anonymous undifferentiated group who have no attachment to the enterprise's purpose." They seek to maximize their wages, having learned that any other ambition is an absurdity. Weil's identification of this abandonment of the mind while on the job conflicted with her earlier assumption that thought could triumph in spite of all oppression. She had asserted

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[120]"Letter #15," 1936, p. 47; she wrote to the same correspondent in an earlier letter (#4, p. 44) that "whatever degrades the intelligence degrades the whole man."

with optimism that nothing "can prevent us from thinking clearly" only to discover that physical exertion, repetition, and humiliation steal away that function.

> The complete ignorance of that upon which one works is totally demoralizing. One lacks the sense that a product results from the efforts furnished and there is no feeling of being among co-producers. No longer is there a sense of relationship between effort and salary. The activity seems to be arbitrarily imposed and arbitrarily compensated. One feels a bit like the children whose mother has promised some candy to quiet their noises but they receive, instead, some beads to thread.[121]

The body always follows the mind's dictates, Weil avers—before bureaucratic, rationalized technique they functioned together in one human being.[122] In effect, the two have been separated with the planners' usurpation of all mindful activities and never exercising their bodies and the manual laborer functioning only as the bodily appendage to the plan.[123]

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[121] "Fragments," C.O., p. 113 (Weil's emphasis).

[122] Capital, p. 423: "The separation of the intellectual powers of production from the manual labour, and the conversion of those powers into the might of capital over labour is, as we have already shown, finally completed by modern industry erected on the foundation of machinery."

[123] Note Weil's definition of a slave in "Reflections," p. 86: "A man would be completely a slave if all his movements proceeded from a source other than his mind, namely either the irrational reactions of the body, or else the mind of other people . . ."

In 1936 Weil composed an article which recounts her memories of the fatigue and isolation she experienced in factory work.[124] She writes of the terrible exhaustion all felt after a day's work and how she observed even those apparently strong in constitution who collapsed into a deadly stupor upon securing a seat on the metro. She writes how she would anxiously wonder whether she, too, would have a seat to rest herself in on the way home, how her anxieties pursued her at all times. She began her day's work with a worry that she would be late, she fretted about her speed, about the possibility of broken parts or crippled machinery, the loss of a much-needed rhythm which would assure her of an adequate return for her labors; she worried, too, that she would be injured or be the object of ridicule or reprimand from the foreman. The last was the worst: "a harsh humiliation because there can be no response." She muses that she felt like a swimmer without a destiny, whose arms must keep moving, stroke after stroke, with no let up until death relieves her of the awful effort.

> The constraint. Never express, even in the most trivial detail, a hint of initiative. Each gesture is simply the execution of an order—in each case a specialized manouver. At a machine, for a series, five or six simple movements are indicated, which requires

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[124] "La vie et la gréve des ouvrières metallos," June-July 1936, in C.O., pp. 161-174; note that she used the pseudonum S. Galois, a French mathematician as if to suggest that her account held the same precision and certainty as those of her predecessor by the same name.

> repeating at the same pace. How long? Until one receives an order to do something else . . . . One is at all times alert to an order. One is a thing surrendered to another's will. As it is not natural for a person to become a thing, and as there are no tangible restraints, no whips, no chains, it is necessary to yield oneself to this passivity.[125]

She had sensed something of this destiny in her pre-factory speculations, writing in 1933 that bureaucracy had come to subsume almost all human activity. Her experiences reinforced Marx's chilling view of living and dead labour.

> The rationalized factory, where a man finds himself shorn, in the interests of a passive mechanism, of everything which makes for initiative, intelligence, knowledge, method, is at it were an image of our present-day society. For the bureaucratic machine, though composed of flesh, and of well-fed flesh at that, is none the less as irresponsible and as soulless as are machines made of iron and steel.[126]

The specialized workers whom Weil observed on the factory floor were, as a rule, arbitrary and unsympathetic —loyal to the computations sent by the front office and zealously attached to their production. Thus, the supervisors focused upon output and the laborers on the return of this output. But, Weil sadly adds, the outcome of one's

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[125]Ibid., p. 167.

[126]"Prospects," 1935, O&L, p. 13; writing to Albertine Thévenon a month after she began factory labor, she confided that "It is inhuman; work broken down into small processes, and paid by the piece; relations between different units of the firm and different work processes organized in a purely bureaucratic way. One's attention has nothing worthy to engage it . . ." ("Letter #6, p. 15).

calculations regarding wages was never certain because of the time-keeper's arbitrary disposition.[127]

> The time-keeper's whim and for tasks miserably compensated for which one completely exhausts oneself because all is concentrated—to an extreme limit—on not muffing the goods. Exhausting oneself . . . and not because the task demands that one "work oneself to death"; no—only on account of caprice and the time-keeper's negligence. One works this hard without either subjective (salary) or objective (accomplished works) results that tally with the corresponding pain. Here, one truly feels like a slave, humiliated to the deepest place in one's being.[128]

Mystery and bewilderment seize the laborers who lack knowledge about the operation of the machines they tend hour after hour; sometimes bewildered, other times superstitious in their hope for an uninterrupted run. But, Weil observes, when the machine malfunctions and they are forced to stop, no thoughtful effort enters into the activity. It is as though all methodological thought has been lifted from the human actor and miraculously transferred to the metal furniture of the factory.[129] Not only is a comprehension of the machine's operation lacking but no sense of the whole process is evidenced. She adds sympathetically:

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[127]"Piece-work provides a personal end. But how heart-breaking, how degrading it is, when you put everything you have in you into something, to have as the end in view a few extra pence!" ("Pre-War Ntbk," 1st & LNtbk, p. 12).

[128]"Journal," p. 74.

[129]"It would seem as though the method had transferred its abode from the mind into matter . . . . From the moment when the mind which has worked out a method of action has no need to take part in the job of execution, this can be handed over to pieces of metal as well as and better than to living members . . ." ("Reflections," p. 92).

> Understandably, the worker ignores the destiny of each piece: 1) the manner in which it combines with others; 2) the succession of operations performed on them, and 3) the finished product and its ultimate utility.
>
> But there is more: the relation between cause and effect in the work remains unknown.
>
> Nothing is less instructive than a machine.[130]

Rationalized technique molds, in effect, a new worker who has been shorn of human qualities. Knowledge and interest in the effort has evaporated, each worker responds like the next—head lowered, hands moving in cadence, a veritable battalion of automatons. The worker, Weil laments, has become a thing.

> At the worker level, the relations established among various jobs and functions are relationships between things, not men. The parts circulate with labels bearing their name, material, and degree of elaboration; one could almost believe that they are the persons, and the workers the interchangeable parts. The parts have their identity card tantamount to a description of civil condition; and when it is necessary, as in certain large factories, to show one's card with the photograph bearing, convict-like, a number on the breast, the symbolic contrast becomes poignant.[131]

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[130] Ibid., p. 73. Note that Weil refuses to give herself over to the machine in ignorance; on p. 100 of the "Journal" she sketches the milling machine and jots down things which she believes will help her understand its operation.

[131] "Factory Work," p. 371. Writing of human adaptation to technique in the coal mines in 1932, Weil observed that "At present the drama is no longer played out between the coal and the man but between the coal and compressed air." See Petrement's account of this article, p. 121. The laborer is the physical connection, in effect, between the product and the process.

The thing that the factory worker resembles most is a clock. It is artificial, production time that invades the factory floor, permeates each worker and reshapes human effort into a mechanical effort dedicated to maximum output in a minimum time.

> Manual operations upon machines can attain the required cadence only if those second-long movements follow one another uninterrupted in something like the tick-tock succession of a time-piece, with nothing to mark the end of something concluded and something about to begin. This tick-tock, the barren monotony of which is scarcely bearable to the ears over any length of time, working-men are obliged to reproduce with their bodies.[132]

Thus the scale of production shrinks each worker into a bundle of energy, undifferentiated and devoid of purpose either on the job or away from the daily quota demands. To become a clock-like being, Weil avers, is to lose the most vital characteristic of human consciousness—historical consciousness. Nothing in the process instructs a worker about the flow of time—yesterday and tomorrow are as undifferentiated as the workers themselves. Each day resembles the day before or after because all is measured by the clock in reference to output. Weil sees that this disintegration of a time sense strips the worker of reality; she had experienced that her own memories became clouded and her future, while at the

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[132]Ibid., p. 372; also, Ntbk, Vol. 1, p. 27: "Manual labour. Time entering into the body. Let it be regular and inexorable. But varied, like the days and the seasons."

factory, seemed to hold out only an endless set of orders for her to meet.

> Man is only real, in his innermost self, when he forms the connecting link between the past and the future . . . . To abolish completely what I have been means: uprooting, social degradation, slavery; and, as far as the future is concerned, sentence of death . . .[133]

The link of time past to time future is experienced only in quantifiable terms—how much has been processed and at what rate. Weil understands that this "monomania" of the calculable completely erodes her earlier, philosophical, definition of work as the key to the consiousness of time. Ironically, the factory laborer comes to prefer this regularity, a time devoid of natural rhythms, attuned only to production's pace. There is a security in this artificial cadence which allows the worker to adapt and learn uninterrupted motions. When the machine breaks or the foreman insists upon a change of machines, Weil observes that the worker becomes disgruntled: lost time means less compensation.

The picture of motions set to time within the factory is not one of smooth and harmonious activity. Rather, the clock moves smoothly through its predictable course while the worker frantically moves through a set of

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[133] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 111; also, ibid., p. 157: "Suffering is nothing outside the relationship between past and future, but what is there more real for man than this relationship? It is reality itself . . . . The being who can bear to think neither of the past nor the future is reduced to the state of matter." She adds, in reference to the uprooted, "White Russians at Renault."

gestures that are neither comfortable nor graceful. Here *malheur* is encountered as dissonance and fragmentation, the "Breaking up time," Weil concludes, is surely "the greatest evil we can do to a man."[134]

The recall of past experiences is not readily forthcoming in the conversations exchanged among the laborers whom Weil spoke with and the future seems oriented to getting through the hours on the job; it lies at the end of toil. But time drags, the day appears to be endless.[135] Waiting looms as the most pervasive experience of all. The worker waits for the end of the day, for a change of orders, in expectation of a breakdown or an error, and for the inevitable reprimand. This is an experience that exacerbates the physical stress of the job, filling the workroom with an awesome tension. With this shared anxiety comes a sorry unity among laborers: the bond of an oppressive wait which transforms each actor into a docile recipient of another's will. Writing in 1936 to a factory administrator, she summarizes how disheartening this transformation is:

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[134]Ibid., p. 2; also ibid, p. 157 where she noted that prostitutes and criminals share the misery of slaves who know fragmented time, "a characteristic of affliction."

[135]In "Factory Work," p. 372, Weil writes that the worker "has but one plaint, a plaint that cannot reach the ears of men who have never known this condition, and which would not speak to them if it did: *I thought the day would never end*." (Weil's emphasis).

> The obedience I had to practice can be defined as follows. To begin with, it shrinks the time dimension down to a few seconds. In every human being the relation between body and mind controls, surveys, and directs the flow of time. In the factory, such was the relation between myself and the foremen. My attention had to be constantly restricted to the movement I was performing. I did not have to coordinate it with other movements, but simply to go on repeating it until the moment when I received an order to perform a different one. It is a well-known fact that when the time-sense is restricted to waiting for a future over which one has no control one's courage dies.[136]

In the "Factory Journal," Weil observes how spectacular the sight of women standing silently before the open door of the Forges de Basse-Indre plant, waiting for the bell that will signal that they may enter. Sometimes they stood for ten minutes or more before that open door in the rain, drenched and chilled but never registering a protest at this circumstance. Indeed, their courage was drained, if not destroyed; their total compliance with the company rules never challenged.[137] The spirit hardens, Weil writes, after awhile such demeaning behavior convinces all that they count for nothing. They have abandoned themselves to thingness, responding with greater docility than the very machines they work upon. This spirit does not encourage a sense of solidarity, a bonding together in shared misery or outrage at the plant's management. Weil found almost no expression of the fraternity she had hoped

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[136] "Letter #23," p. 56.

[137] See "Journal d'usine," p. 83 and reference to incident in "Letter #12," p. 33 where she concludes "that it is not normal in a factory to expect any consideration at all."

to enjoy among the world of menial laborers. When she did experience even a hint of friendly concern, she expressed delight reminiscent of the radiant light that might infiltrate into a murky cave and offer a suggestion of hope.

> And in the midst of it all a smile, a word of kindness, a moment of human contact, have more value than the most devoted friendships among the privileged, both great and small. It is only there that one knows what human brotherhood is. But there is little of it, very little. Most often, relations between comrades reflect the harshness which dominates everything here.[138]

In the months of her employment at Alsthom's and at the other plants, there are few incidents which provide some sense of contact and warmth among the workers. It is notable that the high point of her exposure to comradely behavior occurred before the fierce heat of the furnaces. When assigned to heat copper bobbins she was overcome by the sweltering heat and failed to replace the hood of the furnace. Another worker swiftly came to her aid. She wrote of this experience with relish.

> A coppersmith saw this and rushed forward to close the hood for me. What gratitude one feels at such moments! Also when this little guardian had ignited the furnace for me, he showed me how to remove the shutter with a hook that reduced the pain of the task . . . Everytime I scorched myself, the welder looked at me with a sympathetic smile.[139]

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[138]"Letter #9," p. 23; Weil reports in her "Journal," p. 50 that a smile or a "brief exchange of pleasantries in the cloakroom" produced enough joy to dispel the overwhelming sense of fatigue.

[139]This incident is reported in a letter to Albertine Thévenon as well (Letter #9, p. 21), where Weil

Rare was this kind of supportive activity in the workroom. Weil more often encountered jealousy among the workers, a sourness or unkindness which kept each laborer at a distance from the next. Petty attitudes and frequent signs of impatience shaped the mood of the workplace, an occasional gruff word from the foreman brought silence where there was the beginning of a friendly exchange.[140] The factory was not a place to find new friends; contact was as fragmented as the job. Clearly, the possibilities for worker solidarity seemed limited and Weil expressed to one of her political associates that she saw little evidence of political consciousness among her co-workers.

> I forgot to tell you, in connection with my factory, that since I have been here not <u>one single time</u> have I heard anyone talk about social problems, neither about the trade unions nor the parties. In the canteen, where I eat sometimes, I have seen only a few newspapers, all bourgeois. And yet it seems to me the management is very liberal. Only once was there a small incident: someone at the factory door had handed out some leaflets about the Citroën affair signed "The trade

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writes of the "untold good" that such a smile did for her. At the Renault plant she reaffirms the importance of this simple gesture, writing of the foreman's sympathetic glance: "Never will I forget this man" ("Journal," p. 87).

[140]Among the references, see "Letter #6," p. 16, and "Journal," p. 83 where Weil notes hos suffering is converted into disdain: ". . . ridiculed by those who have not suffered and an annoyance by those who have and have had enough of their own suffering." Weil recounts an incident where the workers refused to contribute to one of their number's going-away gift. It seems that Mme. Forrestier had irritated some of her co-workers in the past and they would not show appreciation for her in her parting ("Journal," p. 62).

> union section of the factory." All of the women and most of the men workers took these leaflets with visible satisfaction, the satisfaction that slaves always get from a piece of bravado without any risks. But there was nothing else . . . I asked a worker if there was a trade union section in the factory; all I got in reply was a shrug of his shoulders and a knowing smile. They complain about the fixed rates, the lack of work, and many other things, but these are complaints, and that is all. As for the idea of resistance, no matter how faint, that never occurs to anyone. Yet as regards the fixed rates, there should be some way of defending oneself to a small degree even without the trade union, just with a little cunning and above all solidarity; but solidarity is largely lacking . . .[141]

The work itself prevented any sustained contact among workers, requiring neither cooperation nor coordination; there was no basis for group identity except the shared malheur which served to divide the workers. Almost all the tasks to which Weil was assigned demanded that she labor alone, that her wages be calculated without any reference to those around her; it was solitary, individual work.

There was an exception to this extremely isolated activity—that of the small corner of the Alsthom plant where the coppersmiths worked alongside one another in an interdependent process. Weil writes with fondness of this work area, despite the fact that she was posted before the hot oven and condemned to burned fingers and ennervating heat. In that small section of the factory, the rudiments

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[141] Letter to N. Lazarevitch, 1935, quoted by Pétrement, p. 235. (Weil's emphasis)

of fraternity could be observed.

> The chiefs never come here. A free and liberal atmosphere, entirely devoid of servility and pettiness . . .
>
> At last a joyous shop; team-work: coppersmiths, tools—especially the hammer . . . the hand is indispensable; they calculate in order to measure, . . . work in pairs or more.[142]

She took note of the difference between skilled and unskilled, perceiving that the latter (who were women) failed to create meaningful social contacts while the coppersmiths managed to transcend solitary labor. The key, for Weil, was that the male skilled employees resembled her vision of the liberated worker exercising judgment, unfettered by irritable supervisors and participating in a productive community.[143] Certainly her report of the conversations held among the women workers gives proof to her conclusion of their lack of solidarity. She reviews the trivial content of their exchanges and notes that there rarely was a word of criticism about the work conditions. Communication among the unskilled was as choppy and disengaged as the work they performed.

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[142]To Albertine Thévenon ("Letter #9," p. 21) she is ecstatic in her memory of this corner of the plant, writing of her joy at being among these cooperative workers: "On those evenings I felt the joy of eating bread that one has earned."

[143]See Weil's "Letter #6," p. 16 for an explicit statement about the differences between skilled and unskilled workers; also, "Journal," p. 107 where she asserts that the use of ideas and the generosity of spirit have a direct relationship.

Weil's study of factory conditions had been addressed to the question of worker consciousness and the possibility of change mounted by the disgruntled bound together as comrades. She learned through melancholy experience that optimism about such change was unwarranted; rationalized bureaucratic technique creates a docile labor force not given to either solidarity or political action. The final paragraph of her "Journal" reiterates this sad conclusion:

> An oppression evidently inexorable and invincible does not engender rebellion as an immediate response but submission.
>
> At Alsthom I would scarcely rebel except Sundays . . . . With Renault, I came to a more stoic attitude substituting acceptance for submission.[144]

Weil's self-transformation—from submission to acceptance—emerges, in her later writing, as a central feature of her plan for labor reform. She knew from experience that the weight of oppression broke the human experience, leaving its victims dry and desolate. Attention

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[144]Ibid; also "Letter #12," p. 35: "To sum it up, my experience taught me two lessons. The first, the bitterest and most unexpected, is that oppression, beyond a certain degree of intensity, does not engender revolt but, on the contrary, an almost irresistible tendency to the most complete submission. I verified this in my own case—I, whose character, as you have guessed, is not a docile one. The second lesson is that humanity is divided into two categories—the people who count for something and the people who count for nothing . . ."

to a hopeful rhetoric of liberation was barely possible, certainly not a physical commitment to revolution. Anxiety and fear dominated the workroom, not outrage and the passion for justice. Mistrust for others was nourished by the divisive work assignments and fatigue eroded the last vestiges of energy that might have been directed toward friendships. Not a word of constructive reform was offered, nor a hint of camaraderie in either the cloakroom or in the canteen. How then could the revolution which her communist contemporaries predicted be initiated?

Weil's distinction between submission and acceptance drives to the core of the problem; it is a moral one. To the degree that the worker is forced into complete passivity, is subordinated without an opportunity to express opposition, is acclimated to daily oppression as a way of life, submission infects all. Until that passivity is literally lifted, Weil insists, until workers are encouraged "to hold up their heads," submission will persist as the common affliction.

> I know too well that those who are in the toils of a too harsh necessity, if they rebel at one moment, will fall on their knees the moment after. The only way to preserve one's dignity under inevitable physical and moral suffering is to accept them, to the precise extent that they are inevitable. But acceptance and submission are two very different things.[145]

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[145]"Letter #14," 1936, p. 41; see "Letter #9," p. 22 where Weil reports her own victory over slavery.

Malheur - a Summary

Pain that numbs the soul and erodes the natural connection between thought and action is the experience daily encountered by the modern worker; its name, Weil avers, is malheur, an affliction that enslaves its victim in a society that denies the existence of slavery. For every routine and repetitious gesture made in the confines of the workroom, that much humanity is shed from the worker. Gradually, all the natural predispositions—curiosity, sociability, and a sense of fairness—are supplanted with the automatic response associated with the machinery upon which they work. A terrible transformation occurs: the human actor forsakes a vital part of self—the mind—for the promise of a wage. The hard metallic characteristics of the machine become assimilated to the worker's personality and the management seems to accept this and respond to it. Disdain, rough and cruel treatment greet the laborer, while the machine is treated with a certain amount of solicitude by all. Thought is transferred to the front office where all decisions are made, goals and rates fixed without consultation with the workers; the latter are bodies without brain or spirit, obsessed alone with a living wage (which is not secured).

None of Weil's denunciations of the factory better communicate the reach and force of malheur than the following:

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> The faces drawn with anxiety over the day about to begin, the dejected looks in the morning subway-trains; the profound weariness, spiritual rather than physical, reflected in the general bearing, the expression, the set of the mouth, at quitting time; the looks and attitudes of caged beasts, after the ten-day closing when a factory reopens its doors as the signal for the beginning of another interminable year; the pervasive brutality; the importance almost everyone attaches to details trivial in themselves but distressing as symbols, such as the matter of identification cards; the pitiful boasts bandied about by the crowds at the entrances to hiring halls, boasts which express so many real humiliations; the incredibly poignant words that sometimes escape, inadvertently, the lips of men and women who had seemed to be just like all the rest; the hatred and loathing of the factory, of the place of work, often evidenced in words and acts, a loathing that casts its shadow over any possible comradeship and impels workingmen and women, once they have cleared the factory exit, to hasten separately to their respective homes, with scarcely a greeting of exchange . . .[146]

A retrospective look at Weil's thinking about work provides an uncanny sense of the meaning of her early formulations with respect to work's indifferent and indirect nature. In the first of her published essays she had written of the immutable "law of work" which could not respond to what came before or to what would follow; the later descriptive writings demonstrate how brutally accurate this definition was with respect to the laborer's circumstances.[147] However, instead of the worker

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[146] "Factory Work," p. 373.

[147] See my discussion of these earlier texts, infra, pp. 65-69.

transforming passive matter into an object (planned and crafted by the same person), it is the laborer who is transformed into a being much like matter. It is not Proteus who is conquered, as Weil assumed in her youthful essay, but Proteus who conquers, taking human substance and making it shapeless and lacking in historical consciousness.[148] Pétrement's assessment of Weil's concept of work as action in the "void" proves to be only too true; gone is an acknowledgment of self-defined purpose or understanding of process.[149]

Thought and the control over one's activity are wrenched from the producer through a technique that subordinates the executor to the organizer of the task. A bureaucratic structure formalizes this divisive arrangement, promoting among the laboring personnel a regressive stance toward their activity; adults become childlike, surrendering responsibility for action to authorities and accepting "beads" for reward.[150] Absent is a feeling among workers

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[148] See Cabaud's discussion, p. 34; Weil contends in this essay that the seizure of the "always passive" matter vanquishes Proteus.

[149] Pétrement, p. 61: "In real work there is no immediate compensation; to learn how to work is to learn to make an effort in the void, as she (Weil) would say later on" (Pétrement's italics).

[150] Barbara Garson's study of demeaning labor (supra) resonates Weil's findings with respect to the pervasive presence of a suffering that goes beyond physical pain. She writes: "People are treated like children at work. They can be moved, they can be scolded, they can be punished by being made to stand next to a pole and of course they can be fired. Some benevolent companies manage to operate with small sticks, few threats. Still the workers are infantalized. Their jobs are made as simple as possible. They are told as little as they need to know about

that they belong in the workplace; it is a hateful milieu which they desire to escape at the end of the day. Not a hint of affection is found among these same workers for the machinery they operate, no nick-names of endearment or anticipation of being assigned to a favorite spot. Only a shared wish that the machines to which they must go are functioning well and will allow for a cadence that will assure the maximum speed, the maximum wage.

The industrial worker is described by Weil as a modern slave who works for the sake of a salary; the incentive to submit is fear, not the constraint of the slave driver's whip. The political consequences of oppressive labor are laid bare in Weil's "Journal," where she describes her own realization that she was not entitled to the same rights as those guaranteed to other French citizens; she feels that constant humiliation has shriveled her personal dignity beyond recognition.

> While going to the dentist . . . and climbing into the W., a bizarre reaction. How me, a slave, am still able to climb onto a bus, paying my 12 sous like anyone else? What an extraordinary favor! If I were to be brutally forced off, being told that this mode of locomotion is a convenience not for the likes of me, that I must go by foot, I think that would seem perfectly natural to me. Slavery has made me lose all thought of having rights. It seems to me a favor when I have nothing to endure of human brutality. These moments are like heavenly smiles, a lucky gift. Let us hope that I keep

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the operation. The company creates the impression that they are complicated beyond the understanding of ordinary human beings" (Gerson, pp. 75-76).

this state of mind, it is so reasonable.

> My comrades, I believe, do not share this state of mind to the same degree: they have not fully grasped that they are slaves. Just and unjust words are undoubtedly assimilated up to a certain point—in this situation where all is injustice.[151]

Docility invades the worker's spirit, sapping all potential for resistance. Weil ponders the existence of this mood which holds the laborer to the task without chains and whips and concludes that its pervasiveness is morally more crippling than the slavery of antiquity. Fear undergirds this docile behavior—a psychological fear that the foreman will return and make a hateful spectacle of the vulnerable subject; a social fear that the foreman will capriciously fire the worker from the job. Such trembling prompts strong and weak alike to succumb to the arbitrary orders of management, hastening the motions, bowing the head and shoulders lower to the inanimate machine. In an economy which is already glutted with the unskilled, no one wishes to be let go; thus, every worker toes the mark in the hopes of meeting the daily quota and avoiding a negative reaction from the supervisor. The unemployed laborer, Weil writes, "will gradually decline, abandoned by God and man, and with absolutely no resources, not only towards a slow death but before that to a state of utter disintegration—unless some firm has the charity to give him a job; and against this no amount of pride and

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[151]"Journal," p. 92.

courage and intelligence will avail him.[152] Even the sturdier worker quakes at the hint of illness, disability and age (which is, after all, inevitable); the loss of speed attached to any of these frailties means the "malheur of the incapable."[153] A reduction of wages follows from reduced speeds and the subsequent decrease in food allowance. The treacherous cycle begins—the weary worker earns less, eats less, therefore, works slower: a vicious round that eventually leads to devastation.

Rebellion, according to Weil, hardly emerges from this type of dynamic; rage and loathing must be swallowed in the interest of self-preservation. It is "toujours forcer." One constantly pushes against one's physical limits, recognizing that "One is in the world in order to obey and be silent."[154] Submission is the predictable outcome of industrial oppression, Weil concludes, not zealous political organizing and a show of power against the tyrannies of the workplace.

> It is true that a man of strong soul, if he is poor and dependent, has always the resource of courage and indifference to suffering and privation. It was the resource of the Stoic slaves. But that resource is not available to the slaves of modern industry. The work they live by calls for such a mechanical sequence of gestures at such a rapid speed that there can be no incentive

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[152]"Letter #13," p. 41.

[153]"At 40 years, one is viewed as incapable" ("La vie et la greve," C.O., p. 166.

[154]Ibid., p. 165.

> for it except fear and the lure of the pay packet. The Stoic who made himself proof against these incentives would make it impossible for himself to work at the required speed. The simplest way, therefore, to suffer as little as possible is to reduce one's soul to the level of these two incentives; but that is to degrade oneself. So if one wishes to retain human dignity in one's own eyes it means a daily struggle with oneself, a perpetual self-mutilation and sense of humiliation, and prolonged and exhausting moral suffering; for all the time one must be abasing oneself to satisfy the demands of industrial production and then reacting, so as not to lose one's self-respect, and so on indefinitely. That is the horror of the modern form of social oppression; and the kindness or brutality of one's superiors makes little difference.[155]

Weil's observations of and experience in factory work lead to a finding of slavery that persists in the modern world despite the technological innovations and political protections associated with the national, industrialized state. The epigraphic vision of her "Factory Journal" prescribes a relationship that belies the reality of everyday industrial production; not the knowing, judging worker who steps back from work and contemplates but a figure stripped of thought and energy emerges from the Parisian workshop. A class of frenzied, fretful second-rate citizens is produced along with the hardware and consumer goods of the factory, "pale shadows in the cave."[156]

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[155]"Letter #12," 1936, pp. 38-39.

[156]Note that Weil assumes Plato's image for her description of the workers at the Renault plant ("Journal, p. 92).

Smothered by quantity, these members of the working class cannot calculate beyond immediate needs; gone is a pride in effort and never will a future image be grasped so long as methodological reasoning remains vested in the faceless bureaucrats who respond to the worker as similarly faceless but without the faculty for thought.

> Whoever is subdued to the arbitrary is suspended on the thread of time; he is obliged to wait (the most humiliating state! . . .) for what the next moment will bring; and to accept whatever the present moment has brought. He has no control of his passing moments; for him the present is not a lever by which he can act upon the future.[157]

And the lever that will release the proletariat from the yoke of oppression is not revolution, Weil concludes, but a transformation of the worker and the worker's culture; such a change will penetrate deeply into the flesh and touch the soul turning the head upward toward transcendent reality.[158]

Necessity Persuaded

> Far from capitalist society having developed within itself the material conditions for a régime of liberty and equality, the establishment of such a régime presupposes a preliminary transformation in the realm of production and that of culture.[159]

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[157] "P.W.Ntbk.," p. 20. (Weil's emphasis)

[158] The French noun for labor, travail, is etymologically derived from the Latin word, tripalium, which was a device used to restrain oxen. In both languages the word connotes tortuous constraint. Weil's image of the lever which lifts is a most fitting one to release the victim. See L. Febvre, "Travail: évolution d'un mot et d'une idée, Vol. 41 (Jan. 1948), Journal de Psychologie et pathol., pp. 19-28.

[159] "Reflections," p. 42.

In Weil's earliest critiques of Marx and Marxism, she puzzled over the question of transformation believing that the scope and substance of "scientific socialism" was lacking in spite of its vision of a liberated labor. In the preceeding discussion of *malheur* the transformation of the laborer into a thing-being, a modern slave, was reviewed, indicating how Weil's observations *in situ* confirmed her preliminary speculations about the hardships of industrial work. In this section the same set of facts will be "read" in the context of Weil's indebtedness to both Marx and Plato and their respective views of necessity.[160] In effect, her first attempts at a theology of work combine the concerns of the nineteenth century German socialist and the metaphysics of the ancient sage.

Four major areas of concern about Marx's contribution emerge from Weil's analysis, each pointing to a weakness in his approach to the notion of transformation as revolutionary action. She identifies and attacks: 1) Marx's seduction by the bourgeois idea of historical progress; 2) Marx's optimism with respect to the proletariat and their alleged capacity for leadership and the construction of an ideal society; 3) the limitation in Marx's scope of change and 4) his misunderstanding of necessity and freedom. All these problems in Marx's theoretical

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[160] See the discussion of Weil's theory of reading (*lecture*), Ch. 1.

scheme arise, Weil asserts, because he failed to systematically follow the methodological approach he invented. Consequently, Marx fell short of the scientific standards he believed distinguished his approach from those of his "utopian" predecessors of the socialist movement. Perhaps the most devastating charge leveled against Marx by Weil is that he was the minister, in effect, of a quasi-religious church, positing ideas that were not fundamentally different from those of the bourgeois he attacked with vehemence. She claims that Marxism "is the highest spiritual expression of bourgeois society," tapping the language and concepts associated with traditional Christianity.[161] The fact that he shared with his contemporaries a dedication to the idea of progress—a material unfolding—brought him into the camp of bankers, engineers, and technicians. "It is the story of the hen with the golden eggs. Aesop," she adds, "knew far more about the subject than Marx."[162] If he could have escaped the blinding and pervasive light of nineteenth century optimism, Marx would have understood, as a cautious scientist would, that nature's bounty is not unlimited, that resources are not limitless.

Marx sabotaged his scientific perspective on another level as well—the view that one group of people

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[161]"Fragments," O.&L., p. 131.

[162]"Is there a Marxist Doctrine?" O.&L., p. 187.

followed a providential course toward ultimate redemption. The "historic mission" of the proletariat exposed, Weil asserts, Marx's love of liberty to the detriment of his love for truth; moreover, it expresses the beliefs of an "idolator." What resulted from Marx's quasi-religiosity was a confounding of material production with the eventual attainment of the good on earth.[163] This finding is patently in error, Weil writes, if anything the facts of history demonstrate that "progress is transformed" in the long run "into regression."

The assignment of such a liberating destiny to the working class meets with Weil's complete disdain. She ponders "how there could spring up from the masses, spontaneously, the opposite of the system which formed, or rather deformed them."[164] Her routine bouts with fatigue and humiliation had, in only six months, stripped her of initiative and confidence and her observations indicated that years of working oppression would undoubtedly destroy all vestige of political consciousness. Submission to another's will, not resistance, marked the laborer's disposition. Consequently, "Marx's assertion that the regime would produce its own gravediggers is cruelly contradicted

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[163]Ibid., p. 188: " . . . Marx was slavishly subject to the influence of his age. This influence made him forget that production is not the good." She notes that Marx could not evade the controlling hand of the Great Beast (the social lie).

[164]"Critical Examination," O.&L., p. 137.

every day; and one wonders, incidentally, how Marx could ever have believed that slavery could produce free men."[165] In spite of his rejection of religion, she adds, Marx relied upon a miraculous intervention, a benevolent will that would move misery to triumph.[166] How do the weak acquire the methods of the strong without becoming corrupted by the process? How does the dominant pattern in political history wherein the greater number submits to the smaller get turned around? Promises that it will happen cannot mount such a radical departure from history, nor will all the good wishes in the world make it so. The laborers of the twentieth century share with their enslaved ancestors an afflicted course and "nothing entitles one to promise them, at the end of their liberation effort, enjoyments and power."[167]

Weil is adamant that the vision need not be discarded because the approach has degenerated into a dream; it can be salvaged through study and the conscientious application of the materialist method. An assessment of

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[165]"Reflections," O.&L., p. 117.

[166]"Fragments," O.&L., p. 159. Weil concludes that Marx "believed in miracles without believing in the supernatural."

[167]"On Contradictions," O.&L., 155; elsewhere she rails against the deception of liberation: "At bottom, one thinks nowadays of the revolution, not as a solution to the problems raised at the present time, but as a miracle, dispensing one from solving problems" ("Critical Exam., O.&L., p. 136).

the "material conditions which determine our possibilities of action" is the primary task and that demands that the social scientist persist through the grim facts, in spite of the yearning to project a better day, until that task is accomplished. One specific example of Marx's failure to proceed in the use of his own method through the bitterness of material reality is the analysis of political power and the appetite for dominance among those who have gained monetary, religious, or military privileges. Even more painful for the liberty loving Marx is the truth of force's damage to those who have long been oppressed.

> In short, Marx's revolutionary materialism consists in positing on the one hand, that force alone governs social relations to the exclusion of anything else, and, on the other, that one day the weak, while remaining weak, will nevertheless be the stronger.[168]

Weil points to the circularity of the power relationship—rich and poor, oppressed and oppressor are equally subjected to Nature's limits. For all the improvements introduced by technological change, no significant change has been rendered, over the many centuries, in the long and debilitating shadow of human servitude. There is only a chimerical progress which appears, Weil soberly notes, as a lifting process "with respect to nature" from subservience to mastery; but nature has never released its hold.

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[168]"Fragments, O.&L., pp. 158-59.

> In reality, at these higher stages, human action continues, as a whole, to be nothing but pure obedience to the brutal spur of an immediate necessity; only, instead of being harried by nature, man is henceforth harried by man. However, it is still the same pressure extended by nature that continues to make itself felt, although indirectly; for oppression is exercised by force, and in the long run all force originates in nature.[169]

Power is always a means, rather than an end and it never gains stability. Those who exercise it are as much victims to its excesses as those who feel the sting of oppression. Everyone, Weil declares with the certitude that marks her analysis, eventually becomes "the plaything of the instruments of domination they themselves have manufactured," they are the "chattel of inanimate chattel."[170]

What Weil found lacking in Marx, in the final analysis, was a notion of necessity that tallied with her belief in its endurance. Without such a notion Marx was able to project an idealized society that saw intellectual and manual labor united, that had effectively displaced necessity with the perfect good. He failed to accept the one contradiction that cannot be overcome through social activism—the absolute opposition of necessity and the good. Weil writes, "The essential contradiction in the

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[169] "Reflections," O.&L., p. 63.

[170] Ibid., p. 69. In the "race for power" Weil writes the rich will be forced to sacrifice their loved ones: ". . . so it is that Agamemnon sacrificing his daughter lives again in the capitalists, who, to maintain their privileges, acquiesce lightheartedly in wars that may rob them of their sons" (p. 68).

human condition is that man is subject to force, and craves justice. He is subject to necessity, and craves for the good."[171]

Marx's finding that "the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane conditions ceases" was totally rejected by Weil.[172] Even before she had the experience of factory work she argued that the onus of Adam's curse would never fade, that the drudgery of labor would endure after the property relations shifted and workers appropriated the means of production. Automated labor which frees all from physical pain and humiliation is but a dream.

> If it were possible to conceive of conditions of existence absolutely devoid of any unforeseen contingency, then the American myth of the robot would have a meaning, and the complete abolition of human labour through a systematic organization of the world would be feasible. It is not so, and these are only fictions . . . no technique will ever relieve men of the necessity of continually adapting, by the sweat of their brow, the mechanical equipment they use.[173]

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[171] "Fragments," O.&L., p. 159.

[172] Capital, Vol. 3, Cy. 48, p. 799.

[173] "Reflections," O.&L., p. 52; also, p. 43. Weil's position is supported by others of Marx's critics, including H. Arendt, The Human Condition, p. 105, who identifies this issue as being most contradictory in Marx's writing: "We are left with the rather distressing alternative between productive slavery and unproductive freedom." See also Yves Simon, Work, Society and Culture, p. 31. Georges Friedmann, The Anatomy of Work, passim, denies that automated technology will produce a productive, satisfied working population.

Concerted study of the material conditions, she reiterates, will help to demystify necessity's function in human life but it will not lead to its transcendence on earth. Marx's deviation from the "solid" orientation he prescribed for the muddled idealism he expressed with respect to post-revolutionary life prevented him from coming to grips with genuine liberty.[174] Not the benevolent society of contented workers who own their instruments of work, laboring as a homogeneous species, but a chaotic crowd of idlers would emerge from this vision. "If one were to understand by liberty the mere absence of all necessity," she writes in her critique of post-revolutionary society, "the word would be emptied of all concrete meaning."[175]

Marx's intentions cannot be faulted, Weil claims, because he wished for the actualization of workers' freedom and the end to centuries of alienation from nature.[176]

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[174]Weil writes, "Here we have an idea of genius . . . It is not a doctrine; it is an instrument of study, research, exploration and possibly construction for every doctrine that is not to risk crumbling to dust on contact with a truth. Having had this idea, Marx hastened to render it barren, as far as it lay with him, by plastering over it the wretched cult of science of his time" ("Is There a Marxist Doctrine?", p. 171).

[175]"Reflections," p. 85. It is noteworthy that Weil's fear of a "nation of idlers" calls up her list of "temptations" and her personal resolve to triumph over idleness in order to live in the world; reality, for her, entails the tension of effort and discipline which do not come into play where one does not work.

[176]Note that the last, unfinished, essay Weil composed about Marx, "Is There a Marxist Doctrine?" (1943), O.&L., conveys a sense of pity for the man whom she felt

But he failed to follow either of his influences—materialism and idealism—to their respective and necessary conclusions. At the juncture where Marx left off his critique of capitalism to take up the challenge of transformation, his materialism crumbled. On the other hand, Marx neglected to develop the idealistic aspects of his thought, specifically those proto-religious notions which ultimately appeared as a reduced vision and a vulgar religion.[177] His was a myopic mode of seeing connections between materialism and idealism, Weil adds; a reconciliation at too base a level:

> The vice of such a conception is not the combination of materialism and idealism, for they have to be combined; it is the placing of this combination at too low a level; for their unity dwells in a place above the skies; outside this world.[178]

Marx wed these approaches at a level that confounded the good with the necessary; his materialism allowed for "the automatic production of the good" because of the pressures of need. This conclusion is challenged by Weil as hasty and erroneous. It is not a benign failure on Marx's part because it has resulted in blinding results for those who struggle in their oppressive routines and find the promise attractive without grasping

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was entrapped by social illusion in his admirable quest for freedom.

[177]Ibid., p. 174. "Marxism is a fully-fledged religion, in the impurest sense of the word. In particular it shares in common with all inferior forms of the religious life the fact of having been continually used, according to Marx's perfectly accurate expression, as an opium of the people."

[178]"Fragments," O.&L., p. 164.

the way.

Plato, by contrast, did not dismiss necessity nor did he unite necessity and the good in his discussion of human life. Weil's shift to this ancient sage for her analysis of transformation is a crucial one; her transforming leap backwards advances her critique of Marx and reconciles Plato and Christianity. She refers to Plato's teaching as the substance of an authentic understanding of liberated humanity, embracing the fact that he provides an approach to necessity which reaches between the mysterious reality of the transcendent order and the mundane reality of historical beings. It is in his Timaeus that Weil discovers the corrective to Marx and the material for her later discussion of spiritual labor.

> He does not say that the good is an automatic product of necessity, but that the Spirit has dominion over necessity through persuasion; it persuades necessity to cause most of the things that take place to turn towards the good, and necessity is overcome by means of wise persuasion.[179]

Weil's retrieval of the Timaeus functions for her in both a symbolic and literal sense. She sees Plato's ancient cosmological narrative as the testimony of an exemplary philosopher; he is the mediator between eternal verities and earthly circumstance, wise and articulate in the transmission of these revelatory truths. "He had come

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[179]"Is There a Marxist Doctrine?", O.&L., pp. 174-175.

out of the cave" Weil writes in awe of her mentor "and seen the sun and returned to the cave. The Timaeus," she continues, "is a book of a man who comes back into the cave from above."[180]

In addition to the symbolic function of the text with respect to the philosopher's role, Weil undoubtedly recognized a similarity between her task and that of the ancient writer's centuries before her. While he disputed the assumptions of his predecessors about the pivotal consequences of accident in the creation of the world, she renounced her contemporaries who set forth a seemingly accidental vision of the new social order.[181] Plato's thesis in the dialogue revolves around the active function of reason, its taming consequences in bringing order out of primordial chaos. Weil, also, emphasizes the role of reason, the productive task of knowledge which takes account of the limiting (that is, necessary) conditions of reality. She disowns any theory or practice that anticipates an idealized new order, that disaffirms

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[180] "God in Plato," On SNL, p. 132. Weil's encounters with the shadow figures of the factory "cave" is noteworthy; in more ways than one Plato emerges as Weil's "role-model" for the later development of a theory of spiritual labor.

[181] See the excellent discussion of this dialogue in Glen Morrow, "Necessity and Persuasion in Plato's 'Timaeus,'" in R. E. Allen, ed., Studies in Plato's Metaphysics, N.Y., Humanities Press, 1965, pp. 421-438. Morrow indicates that Plato was engaged in the renunciation of the atomist's theories of creation.

the fundamental presence of necessity in human life.

In Plato's creation account two causes come together in the making of the orderly world: the divine, which is perfect goodness, and the necessary or the errant cause. Creation is an act of the Demiurge who exacts a beautifully crafted object out of the raw material used for this primordial act. The Demiurge is a supreme artisan who, like the human counterpart (a coppersmith, perhaps, such as those Weil had observed at Alsthom's), starts with a preconceived design, acts with regard to the stresses and tensions embodied in matter and a dedication to the best possible result. The consequence of this effort is not perfection but it "implies just that insight into ends," one commentator on the Timaeus observes, "that understanding of materials and that manipulation of necessities that characterizes genuine crafts."[182]

Weil understands the divine cause to be more encompassing than that of an artisan; she writes of the "perpetual geometer" whose standards of beauty coalesce with those of the artisan. An expression of proportion and harmony is embedded in the worldly order, she asserts, one which the ancient Greek scientists grasped in their effort to imitate the divine act of creation. They would temper their effort, as God had, with a loving respect for necessity unlike the modern scientist who knows nothing

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[182]Ibid., pp. 435-436.

of these ancient ideals and ruthlessly attempts to vanquish necessity. She communicates her scorn for the moderns in the following passage.

> The Greeks, wherever they thought they could discern an order, constructed an image of it with perfectly definite elements, conforming to necessity . . .
>
> The blind necessity which constrains us, and which is revealed in geometry, appears to us a thing to overcome; for the Greeks it was a thing to love, because it is God himself who is the perfect geometer.[183]

This understanding of divinity explicitly relates to Weil's conviction that Plato was a proto-Christian writer and that his Athenian compatriots realized something of the impossible unity of the Christian trinity in their worship.[184]

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[183]"Classical Science and After," On S.L.N., p. 20 & p. 21. "Pure science is a contemplation of the order of the world as necessity" ("N.Y.Ntbk," 1st&L NTBK, p. 75); "The idea of necessity has been lost. In science it appears only as the rules of the game (chess)" (PWNtbk, p. 7). The remarks of G. de Santillana are appropriate to this discussion. He identifies Weil as one of the "two fundamental moderns" (Tolstoy is the other) in his remarkable study of myth. He lauds her use of the Timaeus, which he sees as the myth behind all other myths. He writes, "The notion of limit, of measure, of commensurability, which guided the thought of sages have survived only in Greek science and in the catharsis of tragedy." Giorgio de Santillana & H. von Dechend, Hamlet's Mill, Boston, Godine, 1977, p. 330. Weil's metaphysical base is completely derived from Greek science and tragedy; the former expresses itself in this chapter, the latter in the next.

[184]"God in Plato," On S.L.N., pp. 130-137, passim; note that the creative aspect of the trinity is associated with the "Father." She writes: "That this mathematical necessity should be the substance of the world—that is the sign of our Father, the witness that necessity was conquered from the beginning by a wise persuasion" ("NYNtbk," p. 80).

Reason and restraint, love and purposeful abandonment of omnipotence characterize the supernatural being of the Timaeus. It is impossible for humans to know the unity that is transcendent reality but the beauty of the world gives proof of its marvelous harmony, a harmony that reflects itself in the ideas posited by Pythagoras. The supreme intelligence elicits from fixed, limited matter an order that conveys proportionality; its creative impetus is without force and the contemplation of both the process and the result will promote human reconciliation with the divine reality.[185] The worldly order comes about through a reasonable prompting of necessity.

> Reason overruled Necessity by persuading her to guide the majority of those things that become towards what is best . . . this universe was constructed in the beginning by the victory of rational persuasion over Necessity.[186]

What is necessity? For Plato it is represented in reference to chance "by the causal sequences"; to intelligence, which assures purpose in the world, necessity offers variance. Weil writes that it represents a "compromise

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[185]Weil is particularly entranced by Plato's arrangement of the primary materials of the cosmos, alluding to the beauty of their proportional design; fire (visible) and earth (tactile) are opposing elements, with air and water filling the space between them.

[186]Plato, Timaeus, ed. & trans. John Warrington, London, Dent., 1965, p. 51; and Morrow, op. cit., p. 433.

between God and matter."[187] She incorporates in her metaphysics of necessity the notion that it functions on behalf of human freedom, it is the proof of supernatural withdrawal from worldly activity. Necessity prevails as a "screen placed between God and us so that we can be," providing limitations so that human action is not taken in the context of chaos.[188] It partakes of paradox because necessity is both the condition for human autonomy from divine authority (through God's loving act of surrender of the created world to necessity) and the precise means by which divine reality is contemplated and, in turn, reconciles humanity to the transcendent. "Without necessity," she asserts, "it is impossible to conceive the divine alone, or grasp it or participate in it in any other way."[189] This interpretation of creation does not extinguish necessity as an "order of conditions," "possibilities," "the basis of reality" which frames and guarantees liberty in the human order.

Necessity possesses the same impossible combination of factors as does the divine, and like the divine, it eludes knowledge of its composition. All is subject

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[187]"NYNtbk," p. 301; I would like to note the usefulness of an unpublished manuscript prepared for a Ph.D. comprehensive by Mary Hunt, "The Philosophical Framework of Simone Weil—A Sketch for Theology," Berkeley, GTU, 1977.

[188]Ntbk, Vol. 2, p. 402 (Weil's italics). See also, p. 480.

[189]Ibid., p. 66.

to necessity but it is differentiated, having a divine and worldly aspect.[190]

> There are only two kinds of necessity; that which corresponds to ends that can be visualized and that which corresponds to beauty. The ends that can be visualized are ends which are at the level of necessity. But that is precisely why they are not ends; they are means. The others are transcendent with respect to necessity.[191]

"What is necessity without labour?" Weil asks, echoing, in some respects, the question of her earliest published excursion into the definition of work where she held that indirection, intermediary effort marked this reality.[192] Final ends are not considered by laborers in the routine that they are subjected to. When Madame Forrestier explained to Weil why a sickly co-worker withheld a response to an impatient supervisor at Alsthom's, she was expressing the relationship of necessity as means. Weil entered this account in her "Journal": "She can not give an answer—when one has to earn a living, it is necessary to do that which is necessary."[193] The harsh reality of

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[190] See "NYNtbk," 1st & LNTBK, p. 143. Weil writes that whatever "exists is subject to necessity. But there is carnal necessity into which the opposition of good and evil does not enter, and a spiritual necessity which is entirely subjected to this opposition." Weil is indicating, here, the difference between those who experience submission and those who consent by their own will.

[191] Ntbk, p. 626; also, p. 629; "The idea of necessity is that of condition. It therefore implies finality. But any end which can be visualized is a means. The only finality is transcendental with respect to causality. That is beauty."

[192] See the discussion supra, re: Proteus essay, 1929; her question appears in Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 217.

[193] "Journal," p. 38.

animal laborans (the enslaved beast of burden who has been shorn of human rights) is that of being caught in an unending round of necessary acts in order to survive (work to eat, eat to work, work . . .). Elsewhere she concludes:

> There is in manual work and in general the work of production, that which is properly called labor, an irreducible element of servitude which not even perfect social equality would efface. The fact is that it is governed by necessity, not by finality (ends). One produces because of need, not with a view to a good . . .[194]

Among workers the experience of necessity is overwhelming; it is an experience of compulsion, of the grinding action that destroys the spirit and leaves little possibility of contemplating that aspect of necessity that is order and beauty. But, Weil insists, the worker always desires more than bread even when they cannot identify what that something is; in part, that is what *malheur* precipitates: an experience of yearning without knowing why. The *Timaeus* teaches that the divine artisan has given both necessity and reason to the creation; accordingly, both reside in the human spirit as limit and possibility. "There are two desires which naturally reside in men," she writes, "one through the body, which is the desire for food, the other through the divine part of us, which is desire for reason."[195]

Affliction originates in necessity, it is pure means; as a "brutal master" it sweeps away the transcendent

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[194] "Condition premiere non-servile," in *C.O.*, p. 261.

[195] *Ntbk.*, Vol. 1, p. 321.

and leaves only the cold chill of means. The relationship that obtained in the primordial act of creation between reason and necessity is reversed and necessity as force cruelly displaces all else. Unlimited arbitrary suffering ensues, dominating the life of the industrial worker and foreclosing access to supernatural reality. Rather than face the truth of their condition, the depth of their deprivation, laborers comfort themselves with illusion; they become enslaved to the will and intelligence of others, disbelieving in their own capacity for independent thought and judgment. There never has been, nor will there be a peasant or workman mystic, she asserts, because disgust leads to deception rather than a spiritualized view of the world of work.

> This disgust which is so often present, ever threatening to break out—the soul flees from it and seeks to conceal it from itself through vegetative reaction (instinct of self-preservation). There is a mortal danger of admitting it to oneself. Such is the origin of the lie peculiar to working-class circles (there is a lie peculiar to every type of environment).
>
> To admit it to oneself and yield to it is to fall. To admit it to oneself and not yield is to rise.
>
> This disgust is the burden of Time. It is a cross.[196]

Thus it is that Weil approaches the transformation of *malheur* through Plato and Christian motifs of sacrifice. As the divine artisan of the *Timaeus* accepted necessity as a partner in the creation of the world, although a secondary one,

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[196]Ibid., p. 301.

so, too, must the human actor accept the limiting functions of necessity. But, Weil is quick to add, acceptance is freely given without the compulsion of another's will and in the same loving spirit that the divine cause expressed in patiently prodding necessity to participate in worldly affairs.

> In this way, necessity becomes related to man, not as master to slave, or as equal, but as a picture which is looked at. It is in this looking that the supernatural faculty of consent comes to birth. It is not to force as such (because it compels) that consent is given, but to force as necessity. Pure intelligence is at the intersection of nature and the supernatural . . . . Necessity, mediator between the natural part of us and the supernatural consent.[197]

The Christian motif of crucifixion is introduced in Weil's discussion of transformed affliction as a model; it is closer to human experience than that of the creation activity of the "Father." Weil regards the "Son" as the Father's thought of necessity, the "mediator" between human and divine reality. Accordingly, necessity ought not be transcended because it partakes of transcendence. Marx's formulation is patently wrong, Weil avers, when he sees freedom emerging from the ashes of necessity. "No," she retorts, freedom is not a dissolution of necessity but a movement "from necessity endured to necessity methodologically handled . . . from capricious and unlimited constraint

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[197]"NYNtbk," 1st & LNTBK, p. 89.

(oppression) to limited necessity."[198] Although the soul becomes hardened from relentless and oppressive labor, the worker is not condemned to despair; Weil identifies Christ's passion as the intermediary and lifting event that should convert futile labors into meaningful spiritual endeavors.[199]

> Work—this is always man acting as a counter-weight to the universe. And the pain of work is transformed into passion when man works without personal motives and incentives.
>
> But what happens when man works under the lash?
>
> In the case of the worker, evil takes the form of fatigue and disgust.
>
> Anyone who works unconsciously does not imitate the crucifixion.[200]

Weil had experienced, in her factory days, the weight of fatigue and monotony and adapted herself as best she could to the "discouragement, apathy and disgust" that filled her soul. She could not rely upon her consciousness to lift her spirit, her desire for reason was

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[198] "PWNtbk," 1st & LNTBK, p.22 (Weil's emphasis); note H.Arendt, p.121 who writes in partial agreement with Weil regarding Marx: "Man cannot be free if he does not know that he is subject to necessity, because his freedom is always won in his never wholly successful attempts to liberate himself from necessity." Weil presents a slightly different case with respect to necessity; it is through liberation that one reconciles the transcendent necessity to oneself and becomes free of the earthly, forceful necessity that forecloses human choice.

[199] "All suffering which does not detach us is wasted suffering. Thus, all non-accepted suffering. Lost—suffering—nothing more appalling; produces a desolate coldness, a warped soul." (Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 216)

[200] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 592.

all but eroded away. It was only after her religious experiences in the latter part of the 'thirties that she grasped the parallel between the suffering of the disinherited worker and the scorned and hated Jesus. But she had known all through the decade that monetary compensation and the promise of another day's work could not fill the soul and were scarcely reasons to trade the mind and soul as well as the physical energy required to meet production goals.[201] She was well aware that the dehumanization of her co-workers began with the terrible fatigue and humiliation foisted upon them and grew with the never-ending round of mindless tasks, the denial of individual purpose and the capacity for responsible adult action.

The round image of the clock epitomizes Weil's contrast between the malheur endured and the malheur transformed. The first lacks all semblance of a humane process, it is stripped of the potential for good—it is the "carnal necessity" that obliges the victim to submit without choice. "Spiritual necessity" supplants the former only where the malheur has been transformed through the void into a loving acceptance of the supernatural reality. The constant tick-tock of the time-clock and its response in the cadence of the piece-rate worker indicate the presence of affliction

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[201] See Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 144 where she indicates that employment, money and property constitute a "triple form of idolatry" which "balance the fatigue and disgust produced by work . . ."

that dominates without consciousness of the cross. On the other hand, the cosmological clock which assures the movement of the planets and the predictable variation in seasons and day to night becomes the symbol of a necessity that attaches the worker to the universe and to God's loving order.

She writes that "work is so monotonous that the workers may easily sink into despairing apathy or seek the grossest relaxations; for their work reveals too obviously the futility which afflicts all human conditions."[202] The repetition of goad and reward, orders, speed, payment, debilitates. Weil continues, "A man works himself to exhaustion in order to eat, and he eats in order to get strength to work, and after a year of labour everything is exactly as it was at the beginning. He works in a circle."[203] She muses, in another essay, that this monotonous effort is akin to that of an entrapped animal, where all movement "curves back upon itself . . . one turns like a squirrel in a cage or a condemned victim in a cell."[204]

To move without going forward frustrates human action but need not destroy the spirit Weil surmises, indicating

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[202]"Some Thoughts on the Love of God," On S.L.N., p. 152.

[203]Ibid., see H. Arendt, p. 98 in her discussion of animal laborans' inescapable circumstance that ceases only with death: " . . . all human activities which arise out of the necessity to cope with them are bound to the recurring cycles of nature and have in themselves no beginning and no end."

[204]"Condition Premier," C.O., p. 261.

that malheur is "bearable for man if it is lit up by the divine, . . . a monotonous life is much the more propitious for salvation."[205]

> Monotony can either be the most beautiful thing in the world or the most atrocious. The most beautiful if it is a reflection of eternity—for example, the Gregorian chant; the most atrocious in other cases.
>
> The circle is the ideal example of the beautiful kind of monotony; the swinging of a pendulum, of the atrocious form of it.[206]

Clearly, the arduous efforts of the day laborer did not result in goods that reflected eternity, the perfection of the Gregorian chant and Weil was not prepared to argue this. Rather, she understood that the products of a rationalized process were invariably poorly crafted and without resemblance to the standards of an artisan. From the malodorous workrooms which seemed to be infernos on earth, only the broken remains of human workers gave her concern. In a litany of malheur and its conversion into "spiritual exercise," she writes:

> Exhaustion in the course of labour. Complete absence of hope. Condition of charity . . .
>
> No poetry concerning the people is genuine if fatigue does not figure therein—and hunger and thirst brought about by fatigue.
>
> Tell them Christ suffered from fatigue.
>
> He who has to labour every day feels in his body that time is inexorable.

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[205] "Some Thoughts on the Love of God," On S.N.L., p. 152.

[206] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 598.

> To work. To undergo time and space.
> . . . "Work as a spiritual exercise." "Work as a mystical experience." "Work as poetry."[207]

"Time and space" pierce the worker's flesh, Weil asserts, and invade the soul. The malheur of the physiological moment is the necessary precursor to the release of the spirit toward supernatural reconciliation. Suffering accompanies transformation. It is "indispensable in order to pass from time to eternity."[208] The body consumes itself in the fire of malheur in order to reach the transcendent, so, too, it hardens itself into matter to imitate the affliction experienced by the Son. To work with this supernatural purpose, Weil writes, is "not an imitation of Creation but of the passion. It is a toil that partakes of an inspiration."[209] Personal motives (wages, status, etc.) must be abandoned and the cross taken up as both the incentive and the mode of transformation. "We must make use of our body as of some dead object, as of some wooden instrument."[210]

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[207] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 79; the last line refers to possible "titles" that Weil evidently considered for the study that never was written about the theology of work.

[208] Ibid., p. 213.

[209] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 372.

[210] Ibid.

> Work and passion. By work every being subjects himself to matter, is pinned down by matter. Whether it be a question of suffering or not, it is at any rate one of submission. It means the abandonment of personal will—an abandonment which remains uncompensated.
>
> In work, everything is intermediary, everything is a means—the material, the tool, the body and the soul.
>
> Essential condition for any non-servile form of work.[211]

The body becomes an instrument, according to Weil; perhaps a "blind man's stick" that functions like an extension from the most sensitive place within, "reading" the supernatural signals from without—the malignancy of the industrial workplace as the foot of the cross. In her youthful venture into the coal mine, to discover how the resource was mined and at what human cost, she had observed that the technique subsumed the worker.[212] In these early reflections about the injurious effects of technological progress upon the laborer Weil addresses herself specifically to the immediate social implications of human adaptation to the demands of work. This concern is echoed in her post-factory writings about rationalized

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[211] Ibid., p. 597; note also the passage in "Affliction and the Love of God," On S.N.L., p. 182 where Weil presents the image of the afflicted victim as a butterfly pinned down. The understanding of work as intermediary echoes her early topo on Proteus (supra) but has incorporated the image of Christ, the mediator in its meaning.

[212] She wrote in a 1932 article for L'Effort (see Petrement, pp. 121-22) the following: "Before then he (coal miner) adapted the form and functioning of the tool to the form and natural duration of his movements: the pick was for him a supplementary limb that was an extension of his body and amplified the movement of his arms. At present, he forms a single body with the machine and is added to it

technique. She writes that the laborer "has only to obey passively, with his mind and heart totally uninvolved. In such a situation," she concludes, "the subordinate is almost like an inert object used as a tool by another."[213]

Weil returns to the theme of labor as matter in later writings, incorporating much the same language of the earlier period but her fundamental perspective has shifted to that of a Christian "mystic" wherein the notions of "tool" and "inert object" take on a positive cast. This later understanding locates the direction of transformation in a "descending movement," it sees harsh labor as a blow of the hammer that reverberates through human tissue until it hits its mark and hardens human substance into matter. She reasons that the worker must become "an object in order that the object should turn itself into human labour."[214] This descending, hardening transformation imitates God's action who "transformed himself into man that man should turn himself into God."[215] This metamorphic change plays

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like a supplementary gear, vibrating in time with its incessant shaking. This machine is not modeled on human nature, but rather on the nature of the coal and compressed air, and its movements follow a rhythm profoundly alien to the rhythm of life's movements, violently bending the human body to its service . . ."

[213]"Letter #15," 1936, p. 47.

[214]Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 265.

[215]Ibid.

out both the creation and the passion of supernatural reality: the reach of self into the center (the soul), abandoning the consciousness of external factors for inner truth leads toward God. Through *malheur* the afflicted worker is mysteriously reconciled to transcendent life; it is a death-like event. Weil meditates upon this mystery in her *Notebooks*:

> Apart from death, man's punishment in Genesis consists solely of imposed submission. Work and death . . .
>
> Work is something resembling death. It is submission to matter.[216]
>
> Through work man turns himself into matter, like Christ does through the Eucharist. Work is like death.
>
> We must needs pass through death—that the old man may die.[217]
>
> Labour—this means decomposing one's own living substance into inorganic matter. It is certainly a partial death. It is certainly turning oneself into matter.[218]

To become matter is to be possessed of the "only pure motive," Weil asserts, and that motive is obedience. It is acquired through *malheur* which pierces to the "very centre of the soul" and reaches infinitely beyond the flesh—a nail with a head that is "the whole of necessity throughout all space and time."[219] All creation obeys, matter conforms to necessity's authority and even in the divine realm obedience is the rule.[220]

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[216] *Ntbk*, Vol. 2, p. 345. [217] *Ntbk.*, Vol. 1, p. 78.

[218] Ibid., p. 167.

[219] "Love of God," *On S.N.L.*, p. 182; see discussion, supra, this chapter, pp. 35-36.

[220] *Ntbk.*, Vol. 1, p. 79: "Matter obeys. We are

Obedience suspends all expectations of reward, the self disintegrates in Weil's terms because the ego must die before a true reconciliation with God is possible.[221] In her most eloquent language, she describes the relationship between necessity, obedience and the death of the ego:

> The "I" keeps us confined within necessity as we are confined between the vault of the sky and the surface of the earth. We see that face of it which represents brutal domination. By renouncing the "I" we pass to the other side, from within the egg of the world we pierce the shell. Then we see the face of necessity which represents obedience. We become children of the house and we love the slave's docility.
>
> Necessity-freedom; obedience is their unity .
>
> Necessity, obedience of matter to God.[222]

The surrender of the self, in effect, loosens the weight of the world from the toiler and allows the once bent form to float upward free of all fetters. But this liberating consequence of obedience never develops without conscious consent from the afflicted. There is no confusion in Weil's mind between the laborer who submits to force and the one who responds affirmatively to the limits

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matter." Also "London Ntbk," 1st & LNTBK, p. 338: "Even God's power is also obedience. The Virgin is the creature's obedience, Christ crucified is God's obedience."

[221] Ntbk, p. 150. Weil writes that obedience is the sole motive that "does not in the slightest degree seek a reward for the action, but leaves all care of reward to the Father . . ." and ibid., p. 78: "Work is like death if it is without an incentive. To act while renouncing at the same time the fruits of action."

[222] "N.Y.Ntbk," pp. 89-90.

provided by necessity; the former suffers a "terrible void."[223] Pursuing this further, she muses that the character of force is such that it defiles the occupations that must exercise it in making human goods—the metal worker being pushed by society to the edges of acceptability.[227]

It is the divine Artisan of the Timaeus who serves as a model with respect to consenting obedience. Through reasoned negotiation with necessity, an orderly world emerged. But in addition to Plato's teaching Weil embraces the maxim of Bacon whose "flash of genius" provided the following: "We cannot command Nature except by obeying her."[225] This insight, Weil believes, is revelatory and should be incorporated into the fundamental teachings of all biblical texts that mention the human duty to labor. The "Old Law: In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou get thy bread" represents a mandate that obliges without inspiration whereas Bacon's rule transcends the "curse."[226] The

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[223]Ibid., p. 90, also Ntbk., p. 150 & p. 155. Weil writes that God initiates human consent to necessity before there is a consciousness of acceptance through a loving reconciliation between the afflicted one and divine grace. There must be a void in the soul, however, for grace to enter into the human actor. This aspect of Weil's theology will be developed in Chapter 3 in the discussion of "spiritual labor."

[224]"The curse attaching to the working of iron, bronze and copper—Vulcan; certain accursed castes among the Bedouins; Gypsies; outcast Negro workers in metal—Does this represent a conception of the defilement associated with the exercise of force?" (Ntbk, Vol. 2, p. 500)

[225]"Reflections," O.&L., pp. 106-107.

[226]"Ntbk," 1st & LNTBK, p. 22.

new mandate gives no legitimation to willful mastery over nature but, Weil assures her reader, resonates the peaceable process that Plato narrates in his creation account. This "New Law" combines obedience and consciousness, it "suffices to define true labour, the kind which forms free men, and that to the very extent to which it is an act of conscious submission to necessity."[227]

Slaves and "free men" are separated by the latters' exercise of thought and judgment; both share the oppressive lot of a labor that brutalizes the body and exhausts the spirit. Neither Weil nor her co-workers, however, knew what it was to make considered decisions at the Alsthom plant. They stood before their assigned machines forcing their fingers to manipulate the metal parts in the greatest haste, never looking up or away for fear that a mistake would be made and they would have to face an even more horrific destiny: the loss of job. Compliance with goals imposed by the "front office" (which took no notice of or care for those who executed the work) and enforced by impersonal, harsh-spoken bosses served only to bend their backs into a more brutish form. Years after the experience Weil reflected that "death is not a suicide" at the factory because there was no one who would volunteer to be sacrificed for such meager wages, for such empty reasons. Yet all are struck by <u>malheur</u> and few will grasp the supernatural significance of their plight. Nothing in the way of spiritual education is offered to the worker

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[227]"Reflections," <u>O.&L.</u>, p. 107.

which instructs that it is possible to methodically deal with necessity and glimpse divine purpose through such relentless pain.[228]

> To strive from necessity and not for some particular good—to be driven not drawn—in order to maintain existence just as it is, and not to acquire more—this is always servitude.
>
> (The Good is always that towards which we turn ourselves, that which we lack.)
>
> In this sense, the servitude of manual workers is irreducible . . .[229]

For those who labor in the darkness of a totally worldly necessity and possess no vision of Good, Weil provides some hope—the introduction of "intermediaries" into the life of the laborer in the context of their toil. She offers as an example the "comparison between the Cross and balance," suggesting that the analogy of transcendent and mundane sacrifice be made. Without the intervention of intermediaries, pure means will dominate work and the worker insuring that it will be an "effort without finality" wherein the souls of the worker will atrophy and perish in time. She reiterates the potentially redemptive function of malheur, adding that the supernatural function is impossible but essential to life.[230]

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[228] Note the passage in the "Love of God," On S.N.L., p. 186, where Weil urges love of necessity in spite of suffering: "One must tenderly love the harshness of that necessity which is like a coin with two faces, the one turned towards us being domination, and the one turned towards God, obedience."

[229] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 597.

[230] See the commentary of Maurice Blanchot, "l'affirmation . . .," in L'Entretien infini, Paris, 1969, pp. 153-179.

> Affliction is not a psychological state; it is a pulverization of the soul by the mechanical brutality of circumstances. The transformation of a man, in his own eyes, from the human condition into that of a half-crushed worm writhing on the ground is a process which not even a pervert would find attractive. Neither does it attract a sage, a hero, or a saint. Affliction is something which imposes itself upon a man quite against his will. Its essence, the thing it is defined by, is the horror, the revulsion of the whole being, which it inspires in its victim. And this is the very thing one must consent to, by virtue of supernatural love.[231]

Conclusion

> It would seem that man is born a slave, and that servitude is his natural condition . . .
>
> And yet nothing on earth can stop man from feeling himself born for liberty. Never, whatever may happen, can he accept servitude, for he is a thinking creature.[232]

These brave words were composed as part of Weil's "Testament." the political essay that had led her into the factory for a closer scrutiny of the conditions of industrial servitude. Her months of exposure to the "harsh necessity" of menial labor not only undermined her hope for finding concrete solutions to such oppression but she found that her belief in the resilience of the mind's work was no longer tenable. The "Testament" had been prefaced with two epigraphs that underlined

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Blanchot emphasizes this point which appears paradoxical: to think malheur is to think the impossible and that process creates the supernatural out of the natural.

[231] "Love of God," On S.N.L., p. 193.

[232] "Reflections," O.&L., p. 83.

Weil's commitment to the power of thought; from Spinoza: "With regard to human affairs, not to laugh, not to cry, not to become indignant, but to understand"; from Marcus Aurelius: "The being gifted with reason can make every obstacle serve as material for his work, and turn it to account."[233] But these elevated sentiments were completely detached from the reality that obtained in factory life.

The rationalization of work produced a void in thought according to Weil's analysis, deterring the worker from any self-realization or socially meaningful contact. Neither remedial nor rebellious alternatives were spoken about during lunchtime or after-hours by those who hated every aspect of the work system. Only a perpetual stupor marked the laborer in the performance of desultory tasks and held all to a docile submission. She and her co-workers shared an affliction that Weil termed malheur and characterized as the most invasive and crippling effect of industrial oppression. All those proclivities that brought individuality to the person—initiative, thought, judgment —were consumed by a suffering that transformed self into matter. Capricious goals enforced by brutal supervisors governed the lives of the laborer and released no one until the physical and emotional limits had been exhausted.

Although Weil's original plan to study the material "conditions of existence" of the factory was not defeated,

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[233]Ibid., p. 37.

her specific objectives were gradually reformulated. The realization that rebellious consciousness was not only non-existent but that a base for solidarity could not be found, led her to abandon revolutionary action as a viable commitment.

> Does being a revolutionary mean expecting in the near future some blessed catastrophe, some upheaval which realizes on this earth a part of the promises contained in the Gospels, and gives us finally a society wherein the last shall be first? If that is what it means, then I am not a revolutionary, for such a future—which incidentally would overwhelm me with joy—is to my mind, if not impossible, at any rate altogether improbable; and I do not think that anyone can nowadays have solid, serious reasons for being a revolutionary in this sense.[234]

Reform was not set aside as a method to ameliorate the more obvious consequences of repetitious, demeaning labor but Weil distinguished between those conditions that would lend themselves to change and the implacable facets of malheur.[235] The issues of scale and knowledge attached to production continued to engage her attention until the year of her death. These practical concerns and the concrete reform proposals she composed will be fully treated in Chapter Four.

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[234]"Contradictions of Marxism," O.&L., p. 153.

[235]Weil believed that malheur could not be vanquished through human action but she did adhere to a reform oriented politics which would establish standards for a more humane working condition. It is of note that Arendt echoes Weil's position with respect to the inflexibility of malheur, articulating through her typology of animal laborans that "the very term 'humanism of labor' is clearly a contradiction in terms." (The Human Con., p. 149, ftnte #12)

Even before Weil joined her workmates at the Alsthom plant she had anticipated the near hopelessness of industrial life. She had concluded in her "Testament" that very little could be done to stop the juggernaut course of capitalism and its horrific impact on the worker.

> In such a situation, what can those do who still persist, against all eventualities, in honouring human dignity both in themselves and in others? Nothing, except endeavour to introduce a little play into the cogs of the machine that is grinding us down; seize every opportunity of awakening a little thought wherever they are able; encourage whatever is capable, in the sphere of politics, economics or technique, of leaving the individual here and there a certain freedom of movement amid the trammels cast around him by the social organization. That is certainly something, but it does not go very far. On the whole, our present situation more or less resembles that of a party of absolutely ignorant travellers who find themselves in a motor-car launched at full speed and driverless across broken country.[236]

Thought was in 1934 her solution to this terrible journey. The factory experience and her encounter with an affliction so damaging that the "discursive faculties" were numbed convinced her that it would not be adequate. Thought had to be transformed into attentive obedience to necessity's limits.

If, Weil reasoned, oppression was the unlimited exercise of will exacted upon those bound to the enslavement of unlimited submission, the sole corrective was the teaching of limit. Necessity understood in the Platonic

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[236]"Reflections," p. 121.

sense of its collaboration in the creation of order partakes of the Good despite its association with "whatever is lowest in relation to the individual—coercion, force, 'harsh necessity'"; its "universal" aspect saves the victim.[237] But before this transformation can occur, a void must be made within the soul through deadening affliction. Weil offers the image of the lever in her explanation of malheur's redemptive function. Descent is necessary to ascent, similarly searing pain carries the patient seeker of authentic purpose deep into the abyss before the light of transcendent reality may be glimpsed. Employing Plato's metaphor, Weil describes the transformation as a wrenching confrontation with the truth.

> The absence of good, or rather the feeling of its absence, is affliction. The sun in Plato being the good, darkness represents affliction in the myth of the cave. The first darkness, when the captive freed from his chains is still in the cave, is the frightful sense of its own wretchedness that the soul has when it begins to withdraw into itself and recognize the falsity of the things it formerly thought good. The second darkness, result of the dizziness on emerging from the cave, is the sense of affliction in the soul of the man who possesses the good without knowing that he possesses it. . .[238]

"It is the trade entering his body," Weil reiterates in her discussion of the laborer's transformation. Referring to a peasant saying that expresses the rite of passage

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[237] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 96.

[238] "NYNtbk," pp. 242-243.

for the apprentice who incurs the first blows of pain in performing the tasks at hand, she is assured that the industrial menial will also reach beyond immediate hardship to "the eternal light." But without instruction in the meaning of necessity and malheur, the laborer will fall into despair; acceptance of such awesome, debilitating suffering depends upon intermediaries (metaxu) that convey genuine purpose: "not a reason for living and working, but a feeling of inner plenitude which makes the search for any such reason unnecessary."[239] If there are no opportunities to learn of the intermediaries (and Weil holds out little hope for the industrial world), then workers will be driven by "constraint and the desire for gain: the former implies the oppression of the people, the latter the corruption of the people."[240]

Weil's theology of work emerges from the darkness of the workroom, filled with the sense of human affliction and the "feeling of absence." Neither purpose nor the consolation of sociability can be found in the workaday world but the very same necessity that hardens the laborer's soul offers a solution which Weil understands as the only true solution. The face of necessity that reflects divine light teaches each oppressed worker about a purpose more fulfilling than wages, survival, avoidance of pain.

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[239] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 596, she writes that "Slavery is work without any light from eternity, without poetry, without religion."

[240] Ibid.

Necessity instructs the worker that limit and obedience to matter are supernatural modes.[241]

The themes of this chapter—affliction, force, obedience and consent—anticipate the discussion which will follow in the next two chapters. The experential and theoretical accounts reviewed in these pages indicate that Weil's approach to the realities of work cannot be contained in an analysis devoted specifically to social injustices and remedies. She discovered that the depth and pervasiveness of affliction raise questions about the ultimate condition of human laborers and was dissatisfied with any perspective that did not reflect this reality.. Marx's materialism provided a way into the cave but failed to shine sufficient illumination upon the subjects; Plato offered a brighter light especially when read as a Christian infused with the love of Christ. It is Weil's originality, however, that creates a metaxu, a bridge between the spiritual and the worldly, building from the insights of her mentors and her own transformation. Chapter Three continues the discussion of the spiritual dimension and Chapter Four the worldly; both sections will demonstrate that Weil integrated both realms in her reflections as she did in her living.

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[241]She writes in her New York Notebook that "As necessity in God is thinking Person . . . in us it is thought in act . . ." (p. 90); see also Ntbk., p. 66, regarding the acceptance of limit. For a useful comparison between Camus and Weil on this point note Marie-Josèphe Rustan, "La notion de limite chez Simone Weil et chez Albert Camus, 1953 Terre homme, pp. 32-43.

UMI

LES ASTRES

Astres en feu peuplant la nuit les cieux lointains . . .

Fiery stars populating the night the far skies,
Mute stars turning without seeing forever frozen,
You tear out of our hearts the days past,
You throw us toward tomorrow without our consent
And our weeping and all our cries to you are in vain.

Since it is necessary, we follow you, our arms bound,
Our eyes turned toward your pure but bitter splendor.
All sorrow means little to your aspect.
We keep our silence, we waver on our way.

You raise the soul to you without pain, divine stars.

UMI

CHAPTER III

THE CITY OF *HOMO FABER*

> The spirituality of work. Work makes us experience in a distressing fashion the phenomenon of finality being shot back and forth like a ball: working in order to eat, eating in order to work. If we look on either of these as an end, or each as an end taken separately, we are lost. Truth lies in the circle.[1]

Introduction

It was a driving restlessness with a sense of self-deception and social illusion that brought Simone Weil to the gates of the Alsthom plant and it was an incredible endurance that kept her committed, through months of "harsh necessity," to the belief in the real as an accessible experience. Her discomforts with idealistic reformers and her unsettled disputes with Marxist activists did not resolve themselves as a result of her factory life. She continued to assail those approaches that led away from the unobstructed path to reality but her responses were different. A transformation in spirit had begun.

The factory had reinforced Simone Weil's assumptions about the persistence of slavery into the modern world. There she had observed and experienced a grinding

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[1] *Ntbk.*, Vol. 2, p. 496.

oppressive weight that was produced along with bobbins and electrical parts, an affliction to which she gave the name malheur. She watched with sorrow the bent bodies and listless countenances of her co-workers and recognized that their daily labor shattered hope and levelled all aspiration. She listened to the workroom's clock and heard the workers speak without energy; they had become anonymous, lusterless beings who gave little hint of joy and spontaneity.

Although she managed to steel herself against total submission, refusing to allow the monotony of the job to creep inside her being and sap her disposition to think and judge, she did not separate herself—in fact—from her co-workers. Their pain was hers, their surrender to the machine—body and soul—was her signal to find a humanizing solution to capitalism's demeaning work. The deafening noises, the arbitrary commands, the anxiety about pace and possible unemployment haunted her thoughts summoning her to reach beyond the social solution. The retrieval of the human soul was at stake and nothing short of its healthy survival would capture her interest.

The harrowing presence of malheur did not dissipate in the years following Weil's factory experience; it intruded upon her perceptions and reflections. Although she embarked on a series of journeys—to Portugal and Italy—far from the sounds and sights of the assembly room, the new presented itself to her in familiar forms.

Affliction proved to be ubiquitous; she found it among the impoverished villagers and the robust citizens of a fascist nation. For the many miles she was to travel she had as a constant companion the reality of malheur: it was there among the combatants in Spain and, later, the colonial subjects of France whom she befriended in Paris and Southern France.

Unlike the momentum that prodded Weil to seek truth in the urban factory, the movement from 1934 to 1938 is best understood as a double pilgrimage. She ventured forth to the Mediterranean to seek solace in the arts and culture of its great cities. At the same time, perhaps unbeknownst to her (at first), she began a long spiritual voyage which brought her to a tranquil place within herself. There was no tension between the outward and inward journey; each fed the other and suggests the truth of her view of the harmonious circle. It was not the pendulum's sway that held her, as it did in the factory, but the rotating interchange between sensory and spiritual experiences. The beauties of Florence prepared her for the mysterious peace she discovered in Assisi.

This pilgrimage, geographic and metaphoric, was not a withdrawal from political involvement, an abandonment of her work for social justice. It was a relocation of her perspective. She had been consumed by the industrial process and the horrors of war and knew that

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there was to be no vacation from either. But material necessity and social solution gradually lessened their hold on Weil as she opened herself to mystical understanding. She came, eventually, to look upon the "harsh necessity" that marred the life of laborer and destitute farmer through the lens of a spiritually directed person. She practiced a method which she called attentive contemplation that released her from judgment and hasty solution; it became the key to her notion of spiritual labor. This stance dismissed revolutionary action and ad-hoc correctives as myopic, deficient in vision. Oppression fades, she concluded, through healing the injured souls of those cast into the worst positions as well as those in high places. Beauty heals because, she adds, it is God's concrete manifestation on earth; it assures even the weariest laborer that there is reason for joy and purpose in an otherwise imperfect society.

The Poetics of Conversion[2]

Reality is the Word[3]

Just before her departure from the shores of France Simone Weil forwarded a letter of unsurpassed confessional

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[2] I have appropriated the language of Gaston Bachelard, Poetics of Space, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969 for this subtitle because it suggests the importance of "reverberation" in the experience of poetic imaging. Weil's exposure to repeated words proves critical to her conversion. Note that I take exception to George Panichas' view, in his introduction to Simone Weil, that Weil underwent an "epiphanic," rather than a conversion, experience. I will argue that her conversion approximates the description William James offers in his Varieties of Religious Experience, N.Y., p. 193; that is that

grace to her confidant and friend Father Perrin.[4] It outlined in carefully circumscribed terms the nature of her "implicit" faith and her exilic status with respect to the formal church. She writes of her early notions of religion, her adolescent crisis and her refusal to partake in the sacramental life of the church despite her sense of being both Catholic and Christian. The letter tells, as well, of three pivotal moments in her life that "really counted," that assured her of her true membership among those believers in the "religion of slaves."

Each of the three experiences involved geographic travel and the struggle with some aspect of malheur. The first occurred soon after Weil had completed her work at the Renault plant in late summer of 1935. She had joined her parents to journey to Portugal in the hopes of recouping some of her physical strength and morale before she returned to lycée teaching in the fall. While visiting a small fishing village on the occasion of the annual celebration of its patron saint she was moved to acknowledge her identity with those villagers. It was evening and she had come unaccompanied, feeling broken and isolated but what

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It was a sustained and literally moving experience.

[3] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 365.

[4] "Spiritual Autobiography," written on May 15, 1942 from Marseilles it represents her most complete testimony; she died within the year and made little change in her substantive position about her faith and unwillingness to be baptized.

she observed transformed her mood completely. The wives of the fishermen solemnly ascended the fishing boats—candles in hand—mournfully singing songs of such a melancholy nature that Weil was touched by their wretchedness. These sorrowful silhouettes were one with the industrial laborers working in cadence in every plant; time and place could not break their solidarity—and hers with them all—victims of affliction and bearers of the Cross. All the humiliation she had borne flooded through her on that night and recalled for her the weight of her co-workers' pain. To Father Perrin she wrote that the factory had made her "indistinguishable to all eyes, including my own, the affliction of others entered into my flesh and soul."[5]

Within two years Weil experienced her second religious moment. It mirrored the first to the extent that she went abroad—to Italy—in quest of her health. Suffering from a leg injury that she had sustained at the Spanish front, despairing of the turn of political events to the right, she traveled alone in the Spring of 1937. Although fascist doctrine could not taint the treasured art of Florence and Rome, its presence was in the air; nationalist propaganda intruded upon all activities. Only in her walks through the Umbrian countryside and in the quiet of the tiny Franciscan chapel in Assisi did she feel herself

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[5]Ibid., p. 66.

to be free of the political climate, the cliché and militant gestures and pomposity of fascist Italy. There, within the Romanesque church of Santa Maria degli Angeli she fell to her knees, supplicant before the altar at which St. Francis devoutly, centuries before, had offered his daily prayers. She writes to Father Perrin that this posture was entirely unprecedented for her. She had never before knelt in silent devotion nor was she aware at the moment that she did so deciding to pray. Rather, she confides, "something stronger" than conscious choice compelled her to dedicate herself in this tiny Italian chapel.

It was springtime of the following year when the third moment in her spiritual history occurred. Somewhat closer to Paris, in the magnificent Abbey at Solesmes, Weil struggled to listen to the plainchant she had come to hear during Easter Week with her mother. Her head hammered in fierce, unrelenting pain, discouraging her from giving full attention to the liturgical music. "I was suffering from splitting headaches" she informs Father Perrin "each sound hurt me like a blow." But she refused to be victim to her affliction, forcing herself to attend to the sounds of Benedictine chanting:

> . . . I was able to rise above this wretched flesh, to leave it to suffer by itself, heaped up in a corner, and to find a pure and perfect joy in the unimaginable beauty of the chanting and the words. This experience enabled me by analogy to get a better understanding of the possibility of loving divine love in the midst

> of affliction. It goes without saying that in the course of these services the thought of the Passion of Christ entered into my being once and for all.[6]

While at Solesmes Weil made friends with a young Englishman whom she later referred to as "angel boy" because his face was radiant after taking communion.[7] He introduced her to the writing of British metaphysical poets and she soon championed these writers of the seventeenth century. She was drawn, particularly, to George Herbert's poetry and the poem "Love" became her favorite. She put it to memory and recited it thereafter whenever her headaches attacked with force.[8] She writes to Father Perrin, "It was during one of these recitations that, as I

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[6]Ibid., p. 67.

[7]Weil met two Englishmen during this Easter week, one whom she called "angel boy" and the other "devil boy." The latter was an enthusiast of Shakespearian drama and she conducted a brief correspondence with him about King Lear. (See Letter #34, 70 Letters, pp. 102-105).

[8]The poem Weil committed to memory follows:

> Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
> Guilty of dust and sin.
> But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
> From my first entrance in,
> Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
> If I lack'd anything.
>
> "A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here:"
> Love said, "You shall be he."
> "I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
> I cannot look on Thee."
> Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
> "Who made the eyes but I?"
>
> "Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
> Go where it doth deserve."

told you, Christ himself came down and took possession of me." Confiding this moment to her friend years after it had occurred in language so clear is, itself, a remarkable feat; the ineffable becomes articulate in her account although she conveys surprise that she was the subject of divine contact. Having abandoned the question of God's existence as a concern during her early years and not being familiar with Christian mysticism (or, for that matter eastern mysticism—both would be later studied), she seemed to be an unlikely person for that which follows:

> He entered my room and said: "Poor creature, you who understand nothing, who know nothing. Come with me and I will teach you things which you do not suspect." I followed him.
>
> He took me into a church. It was new and ugly. He led me up to the altar and said: "kneel down." I said "I have not been baptized." He said "Fall on your knees before this place, in love, as before the place where lies the truth." I obeyed.
>
> He brought me out and made me climb up to a garret. Through the open window one could see the whole city spread out, some wooden scaffoldings, and the river on which boats were being unloaded. The garret was empty, except for a table and two chairs. He bade me be seated.
>
> We were alone. He spoke. From time to time someone would enter, mingle in the conversation, then leave again.

"And know you not," says Love, "Who bore the blame?"
"My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.

Weil studied other of Herbert's poems and undoubtedly knew his variations on the theme of "affliction," of bearing the Cross and the purity of love.

Winter had gone; spring had not yet come. The branches of the trees lay bare, without buds, in the cold air full of sunshine.

The light of the day would arise, shine forth in splendour, and fade away; then the moon and the stars would enter through the window. And then once more the dawn would come up.

At times he would fall silent, take some bread from the cupboard, and we would share it. This bread really had the taste of bread. I have never found that taste again.

He would pour out some wine for me, and some for himself—wine which tasted of the sun and of the soil upon which this city was built.

At other times we would stretch ourselves out on the floor of the garret, and sweet sleep would enfold me. Then I would wake and drink in the light of the sun.

He had promised to teach me, but he did not teach me anything. We talked about all kinds of things, in a desultory way, as do old friends.

One day he said to me: "Now go." I fell down before him, I clasped his knees, I implored him not to drive me away. But he threw me out on the stairs. I went down unconscious of anything, my heart as it were in shreds. I wandered along the streets. Then I realized that I had no idea where this house lay.

I have never tried to find it again. I understood that he had come for me by mistake. My place is not in that garret. It can be anywhere—in a prison cell, in one of those middle-class drawing rooms full of knick-knacks and red plush, in the waiting-room of a station—anywhere, except in that garret.

Sometimes I cannot help trying, fearfully and remorsefully, to repeat to myself a part of what he said to me. How am I to know if I remember rightly? He is not there to tell me.

I know well that he does not love me. How could he love me? And yet deep down

> within me something, a particle of myself, cannot help thinking, with fear and trembling, that perhaps, in spite of all, he loves me.[9]

In all of the four religious moments reported to Father Perrin Weil has experienced pain and release in a dual passage; her body moves through physical space, her spirit transcends the immediate milieu she has placed herself in. The first three moments, however, call upon her senses, her eyes and ears, to lift her beyond the environment she appears to be within; the last suggests no new stimuli. However, there is a suggestion in the first few paragraphs of her mystical account that the earlier experiences served as preparatory.[10]

Movement and the cessation of movement weave throughout these religious moments; journeys to Portugal, Italy and Solesmes frame the event, offering vistas of beauty and sounds of haunting loveliness that had not been theretofore experienced. But the essential movement builds from within—a circular movement which intertwines ascent and descent, resistance and obedience. The women

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[9] Ntbk., Vol. 2, pp. 638-639; the text of this mystical moment is published as well as "Prologue" (with an explanatory note written by Richard Rees), pp. 65-66 in 1st & L NTBKS. It is important to acknowledge that she confided this experience to only two friends: Father Perrin and Joe Bousquet (70 Letters), not regarding the event as something to be shared with others.

[10] It is tempting to perform a scrupulous dissection of her account but I will restrain myself by noting only that the motifs mentioned in the text of this section seem to refer to Assisi and Portugal.

in the fishing village sang in cadence as they climbed aboard the boats; the Benedictine voices ascended and descended the scale in perfect harmony, their music rising to the high ceilings; in Assisi, Weil fell to her knees, descended because she felt her heart and soul rising. All of these movements tell of the body's docility, obedience offered up in loving hope.

Repetitious sound is a critical aspect of her mystical moment. Earlier she heard song and chant and intoned the words of Herbert as if in prayer. She had fled the pounding noises of the factory, the terrifying gun blasts of Spain and come to Italy in search of peace but there was greeted with the militant cadences of fascist enthusiasm. Only in the sacred places of beauty did she secure respite after struggling with malheur.

She knew the words of Herbert's poem well and her own mystical narrative mirrors the action of that seventeenth century work. The hesitant, undeserving guest who cannot believe that Love-Christ could have chosen such a wretched soul provides the basic theme in both accounts. Love is gentle but firm—present to issue orders that are within the range of possible implementation: follow, sit, eat. However, Herbert's guest remains seated at the table with Love while Weil obediently, although in sorrow, departs forever from that high place (the garret which cannot be found).

In all the moments of Weil's spiritual pilgrimage reality is both familiar and disassociated from her common-

place perceptions. She is not at home as such in any of the experiences but she is never in exile or alienated from her immediate environment. Different as the Portugese moment was from her previous experience, she discovered solidarity there; and, in Assisi, she joined St. Francis' spirit in devotion to the Cross above the altar. In the Parisian garret she was neither at home nor far from home and the sights of the city lay below her. The flow of time was not disrupted and the routine of eating, talking and sleep suggests a natural connection in a supernatural event.

The dramatic moment in her mystical experience occurs when Christ demands that she leave him. This abrupt leave-taking adds to the ambiguity of her status as a loved one. It involves descent and a sense of forsaken identity but there is a glimmer of hope at the end of the account. The parallel with Weil's theology of creation and divine withdrawal is striking: the absent God appears to have abandoned humanity and there can be no rising toward divinity; grace lifts the spirit only when it has descended to the most painful places and experienced the Son's anguish.

The loving soul does not pursue the transcendent, Weil writes, and acknowledges that she had never sought God; she did go in quest of truth, however. She believed in its accessibility but regretted that the world was covered over with a veil of illusion. Piercing the layers

of mistruth would call upon the heroic in the human actor and most, she felt, were either too sapped or distracted to make the effort. When she prepared her essay on Antigone for the workers in 1936 she hoped to break through their ennui by showing them the courage of one who would not be deterred from her mission. This optimism for worker education grew out of her personal history where, in adolescence, she despaired of reaching unadulterated truth; the Renault workers must also despair of knowing anything beyond the necessary tasks of the day.

> After months of inward darkness, I suddenly had the everlasting conviction that any human being, even though practically devoid of natural faculties, can penetrate to the kingdom of truth reserved for genius, if only he longs for truth and perpetually concentrates all his attention upon its attainment.[11]

From the factory she took the message of attention as a matter of survival—if she allowed herself to think or day-dream she might lose a part, break the machine, or injure her fingers. The repetition of the machine created the pace she would follow and she soon became its slave. Her body and mind were placed totally at the service of the production process; the inanimate and impersonal controlled her activity and any rebellion against this reality could cost dearly in the form of lost time, lower wages, humiliating remarks or being fired from the job. These

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[11]"Spiritual Autob.," p. 64.

memories followed Weil to the Mediterranean and into the Abbey at Solesmes and she discovered that concerted effort was a path to truth. Her pain was not lessened but she transcended it through intense listening and looking. The monotony she found deadening in the plant was transformed in her method of attention; the cadence of the words and the repetition of the lines of Herbert's poem became the components of a prayer which swept her beyond her physical self.

Writing to Father Perrin that she had not prayed before the Summer of 1941, although her recitations are prayer-like, she notes that a daily regimen of prayer has continued to bring Christ's presence to her: "infinitely more real, more moving, more clear" than on that first occasion in Paris.

> At times the very first words tear my thoughts from my body and transport it to a place outside space where there is neither perspective nor point of view. The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes the third degree. At the same time, filling every part of this infinity of infinity, there is silence, a silence which is not the absence of sound but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing the silence.[12]

Weil's conversion stretched over two decades and hundreds of miles, carrying her from a position of implicit Christian faith to explicit mystical practice. In the first

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[12]Ibid., p. 72.

glimmering of her faith she embraced beauty as an inherent manifestation of the divine; she looked from a French mountain and wondered at the purity and stillness of the landscape. In repeating the Our Father in Greek while laboring in the vineyards of Southern France years later, she was reassured of the earth's beauty despite the political turmoil surrounding her. The tranquility she felt within brought her the energy to struggle with the hardships that prevailed in her immediate environment. The special savoring of the devotional words, spoken in silence and heard inwardly, nourished her soul while her body and mind picked up the Cross and carried it across the Atlantic and back again in a feeble effort to save her homeland.

Pilgrimage to Beauty

> For joy to reign on earth without changing the laws of necessity, it is not the big things that must be changed but the little things, which for the soul are precisely the big things.[13]

If pain and sorrow prompted Weil to journey to Italy in search of health and respite from the world's grief, it must be said that joy was her constant companion during those travels. First, in the Spring of 1937 without companionship and subsequently, the following year, with her parents, she crossed the Italian border with only

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[13]See Petrement's account, p. 317 with respect to Weil's remark in the context of her appreciation of Guillamin's La Vie d'un simple.

a hint of trepidation about that nation's fascism. Her mood was one of happy anticipation about seeing the Italian art treasures and hearing its music and she would not permit the authoritarian policies of that government to intrude upon her way. Her letters during this period overwhelmingly attest to her joy but are not free of the political realities that doomed the Continent in the next years.[14]

By some curious twist of fate she arrived in Milan on the same day as the Re Imperator (the king of Italy) and observed crowds of enthusiasts jamming the streets. In spite of this ominous coincidence, Milan readily struck her as congenial. She wrote to Posternak with enthusiasm: "Milan is a populous city of the kind I like and I forsee that in a few days I shall think I was born here."[15] She did, indeed, settle into a program of activities that brought delight, including the opera, puppet theatre and art galleries.[16] But no one experience could compete with her visit to the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie where she saw da Vinci's Last Supper.

She was intrigued by the composition of this great work and explained to Posternak that she spent many hours

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[14]See Letters Nos. 27-32, pp. 72-95, 70 Letters.

[15]Ibid., p. 73.

[16]She was disappointed with the performance of Verdi's Aida, which she attended at La Scala but not the theatre; she preferred the puppetry to opera.

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of quiet vigil before it; she had discovered its "secret." According to her analysis da Vinci created a visual mystery which conveyed the unity of science, art and religion: his technique and inspiration being Pythagorean—each stroke a harmonious response to the others, lines intricately balanced in relationship to the total image.

> There is a point on the hair of the right side of Christ's head towards which all the perspective lines of the roof converge and also, approximately, the lines formed by the apostle's hands on each side of him. But this convergence (which is discreetly emphasized by the arc above the window, of whose circle the same point is the centre) exists only in the two-dimensional space of the picture and not in the three-dimensional space which is evoked. Thus there is a double composition . . . and the eye is led back from everywhere towards the face of Christ, by a secret, unperceived influence which helps to make the serenity appear supernatural.[17]

Weil's study of the Last Supper illustrates her notion of lecture and its relationship to attention. Many hours of looking, refusing to accept that which is on the surface, defines the stance to be assumed by the reader; behind and deep within the apparent reality lies the secret which is accessible to all who make the effort. Neither hasty judgment nor distracted observation will produce the truth and beauty of a text or a painting. Her patient attention revealed the unity of a subject that otherwise might have been taken for granted without experiencing it. This same method was applied again in Milan by Weil but in a social context where she read the

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[17]Ibid., pp. 75-76.

"eyes" of Milanese laborers and discovered their profound pain. She remarks to Posternak that the announcement of increased wages by the officials did nothing to dissipate such unhappiness; she knew the look of slaves!

Milan's congeniality nourished her but Florence proved to be her "own city." In spite of her joy there she was constantly reminded of fascism and remarked, in a letter, that art and political event were inextricably tied. She noted that Michelangelo abandoned his artistic work to go to the defense of his city, only to see the enemy triumph and a decade of Medici corruption. For all that, she adds, art continued to be produced, "periods of creative vitality and intellectual ferment are also periods of great freedom and even of civil discord."[18]

But the popularity of the Italian author d'Annunzio unsettled Weil. She found the works of this national celebrity distasteful and sought solace from the modern mood of his work in the older creations of his countryman—Monterverdi, a composer she would thereafter name as one of her favorites. The fervor of nationalist politics was in the air which she found "suffocating" and charged with a deathly impulse; invidious in its acceptability, she indicted the propaganda as nothing but the "camouflaged deification of death." She left Florence in the hope of

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[18]Ibid., p. 75.

evading these expressions of political glory and national destiny and traveled to the gentle countryside that was the birthplace of St. Francis. Even in Umbria the militant sounds of fascism tracked her steps but she wrote Posternak, in triumph, that some experiences were beyond the reach of the fascists: "they won't have St. Francis with them, any more than Toscanini."

She did not visit Venice on this trip because she believed her loyalty to Florence would be put to the test but she spent some days in Rome where she listened to liturgical music for hours. To her mother she expressed the heavenly potential of becoming a permanent audience-member, spending a blissful eternity among the sounds of Catholic liturgists.

The experience in Italy proved to be genuinely healing. She was refreshed upon her return and filled with enthusiasm for the arts. Her sojourn had charged her with a new confidence in her aesthetic judgment, prompting her to frequent museums, attend the theatre and even travel to Amsterdam to view the Rembrandt collection housed in that city. Although her headaches persisted with unremitting frequency, she discovered how nourishing the things of beauty could be for her spirit. She wrote to Posternak that her list of favorite artists remained select, including Giotto, Masaccio, Giogone, Vinci and Rembrandt. She added hastily that Goya's painting and T. E. Lawrence's epic writing were newer loves but "it is

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only with those few that I have any feeling of a sort of immediate spiritual contact, of the same kind that I feel with Bach, Sophocles, Homer . . ."[19]

The beauty of Italy had touched her soul and reawakened Weil's desire to write poetry.[20] Shortly after her return to Paris she composed the poem Prométhée which reflected her ambivalence with respect to human invention.[21] The solitary and heroic act of stealing fire for human survival is celebrated in this work but the real message is that of suffering for the love of another. Without Prometheus' sacrifice, animal and human would compete for resources and the style of life would be indistinguishable. There is a strong echo of Weil's factory experience in these lines, recalling her sense of becoming a "beast of burden," of being deprived of all rights to the mundane amenities of existence.[22] But in the poem and in her

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[19]"Letter #32," ibid., p. 93; note that Weil's absorption in the heroic exploits of Lawrence will be discussed more fully in Ch. 4.

[20]See the Editor's introduction, Poèmes, pp. 7-8; Weil wrote four poems before her twentieth birthday, all of which are included in the collection cited.

[21]An English translation of the poem introduces Ch. 1; the original text appears in Poèmes, pp. 22-24.

[22]See discussion in Ch. 2 re: "malheur" and the experience on the bus where Weil was bewildered by her status as a second-class person.

aspiration for a qualitatively improved worklife, malheur must be absorbed by someone. The tragic love of Prometheus assures the reader that a transformation has occurred; and Weil, at this writing, was perhaps thinking of Christ's Passion as well although it is not explicit.[23]

Few poets met Weil's standard but she respected Paul Valéry's contribution and wrote to him in the Fall of 1937, sending him a copy of Prométhée. He responded. His letter was filled with praise for her composition, although he did say that there were certain weaknesses here and there.[24] "I have only compliments," he wrote with respect to the poem's "plentitude and strength of movement." He continued:

> Finally, and this is essential, there is a will of composition in this Prometheus to which I attach the greatest importance in view of the rarity of this concern in poetry . . . . By composition I mean something other than the logical or chronological sequence that flows from a subject. I am thinking of a much subtler quality, the rarest I know of and which even the greatest of poets have generally ignored.[25]

This supportive letter must have encouraged Weil to continue her literary efforts. She also thought about the quality of good poetry, indicating to a friend that affliction must be

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[23] In her later writings Christ and Prometheus are compared but in 1937 she was yet to have those religious experiences that brought her to a consciousness about Christ's reality.

[24] See Poèmes, pp. 9-10 for text of Valery's letter; Petrement notes the elder poet was not in the habit of responding to such mail; Weil sent a second poem but received no response.

[25] Ibid., p. 10 (Valery's emphasis).

communicated: "When poetry struggles toward the expressing of pain and misery, it can be great poetry only if that cry sounds through every word."[26]

Perhaps this was missing from Giraudoux's interpretation of Electra because Weil criticized the performance she saw of it in Paris and confided to Posternak that she might try her hand at writing her own version.[27] Her energy was unbounded; she muses that there are many things she would like to do. "Why have I not the n existences I need," she demands of Posternak, "to devote one of them to the theatre!" Although Electra was not to be her subject she did eventually compose a play which is the concern of another section of this chapter. She fantasized that she might create a sculpture on the theme of justice and Pétrement reports that there is some likelihood that she made an effort to create in this media.[28]

In May 1938 Simone Weil left Paris with her parents and traveled to Italy with the intention of seeing more of the artistic heritage of that country.[29] She returned to Florence alone, determined to spend more time in the milieu

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[26]"Letter #34," p. 103, writing of Lear's greatness.

[27]"Letter #31," p. 91.

[28]Pétrement, p. 315.

[29]Pétrement's account, pp. 333-336, is the most adequate one dealing with this period.

she had come to love.[30] Giotto's frescoes in Padua intoxicated her and Venice proved not to be a disappointment. But it was in Asolo that she became engrossed in the study of a particular work which she believed to be a tenth century Magyar-influenced fresco. She discovered its existence, although it was partly covered by a later work, and made the round of official calls in the hopes of stimulating some action to restore the work. Her hunch was dismissed by an Italian art historian who did investigate the original fresco and determined it to be executed in the thirteenth century. In spite of that conclusion, it was through her efforts that interest was taken in the work and Weil found it sufficiently important to prepare an article on the subject which was published in 1951.[31]

Two incidents with fascist zealots marred her sojourn, both giving some indication of her indignation with the pervasiveness of its toxic reality. The first occurred in Asolo after Weil realized that the ticket seller dressed in fascist black shirt had cheated her and she complained; he responded by threatening her with arrest and she let it be known that she was unafraid. During a performance in Verona she and her mother again

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[30]In her letter to Posternak about her love for Florence she acknowledged that such a love is reciprocated by the city. This theme resonates through her play.

[31]Published in Il Ponte June 1951, pp. 612-13. (See Pétrement, p. 335.)

encountered the persistent enthusiasms of fascists. When they refused to stand for the arrival of some official, they were bullied into submission. These unpleasant exposures to what Weil would later term the mentality of the "Great Beast" reminded her that there was no escape from the juggernaut path of authoritarian politics. Artistic life could not progress without reference to this terrible truth.

Experiencing the intimidating gestures of those in power brought a new consciousness about the reality of artistic expression and its accessibility. She realized that the voices which have been repressed by enslavement, social condition and political oppression are not heard although the depth of their malheur would equal all that which has been recorded in the world's literature. Songs of suffering and tales of survival, she surmised, would tell of the folk heroes who were "broken, not bended" like the great tragic figures portrayed by Shakespeare and the ancient tragedians.[32] In spite of the inaudible character of those forgotten voices, Weil was not deterred from seeking a method which would gain a hearing for the silent poets and artists. Her aesthetic theory and its method of attention was dedicated in part to this purpose.

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[32]There is a line of continuity between her experience in Portugal (hearing the melancholy songs of the fisherwives) and the studies she undertook regarding mythology and folk-tales in her later years.

Aesthetic Reflections

> We always look upon aesthetics as a special branch of study, whereas it is actually the key to supernatural truths.[33]

Although the pilgrimage to Italy stimulated Weil's interest in art she had long been concerned with the questions of aesthetic judgment. In her studies at the Ecole Normale she prepared an oral examination on "the beautiful in nature and art" and focused upon the role of imagination in her thesis on Descartes. In that essay she concluded that while "I am first of all only imagination," work is the method that fosters a movement away from subjectivity.[34] Its movement entails a wrenching from the disposition to prefer facile daydreams and concoctions that bear no relation to the real; order and constancy, however, emerge only with this departure. Years after writing these thoughts she repeats them in her Notebooks: "It is by such violence as this that labor causes one to step out of the imaginary and place one in contact with reality."[35]

Literature, according to Weil, often suffers from the seductive play of imagination which opts for "unreality" and fantasy. While Plato's distrust of the poet appears to inform her essay on "Morality and Literature"

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[33] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 627.

[34] See Petrement, p. 65.

[35] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 170 and Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 592 where pain is recognized as a crucial dimension in the transaction.

it does not shape its content or purpose.[36] Weil is concerned that the literary habits of her contemporaries will carry them further into a state of confusion and illusion. She notes that good and evil are ironically twisted in literature, the fictional good being perceived as dull and uninteresting. If, indeed, the fictional world would remain separate from the real there would be no cause for her agitation; however that is not the case. She writes that "We fictionalize our future and unless we are heroically devoted to the truth, we fictionalize our past." The consequence of this process is a loss of reality and an adaptation to moral stupefaction. An elite of literary figures shapes the tastes and aspirations of a people, she concludes and no "antidote" exists, as it had in times past when the church and the community functioned as a counterweight, to limit the scope of illusion.

In spite of her fears, Weil does offer two remedies to the problem of immoral literature. The first echoes Plato's measure—to restrain the literary writer from exercising a voice in the ethical domain.[37] Although she does not specify how this idea would be implemented, in her long essay on French postwar governance (The Need for Roots) she suggests censorship. A second recommendation

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[36]See Ch. 14, On S.N.L., pp. 160-165.

[37]Note Alan Bloom's discussion re: The Republic, p. 405.

reflects the more sustained commitment Weil had to a small group of literary "geniuses" who nourished her. She suggests that only a carefully selected list of writers be promoted, to include: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare's Lear, the comedies of Moliere, the Phèdre of Racine and Villon's The Grand Testament.[38] Homer's Iliad exemplifies her meaning of genius, demonstrating the ineluctable role of necessity and the "density of the real." She points to the author's skill in presenting "several slopes" of the complex terrain that is human reality.[39] The falsity of popular fiction will not be remedied by reading the literary giants she recommends but their truths will prevail. "Their contemplation is the everflowing source of an inspiration" she concludes and "may legitimately guide us. For this inspiration, if we know how to receive it, tends—as Plato said—to make us grow wings to overcome gravity."[40]

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[38]Bradford Cook, "Simone Weil: Art and the Artist Under God," Yale French Studies, 1953, Vol. 12, pp. 73-80, examines the ambiguous character of Weil's position toward literature with considerable snesitivity. The list of preferred authors includes others from time to time (see Ntbks., Vol. 1 & 2, passim), for example Herbert, Marlowe, T. E. Lawrence. She explicitly omits the Italian and German poets (except for Goethe's Faust) and the French (except for Valèry). (See Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 5).

[39]Homer, Weil reveals, offers both the "slope of victory" and the "slope of defeat" to the reader. But Mauriac, whom she recognized as a "talented" writer rather than a "genius" could not "draw evil." (Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 80). "What is lacking is the colour of evil, the monotony and the facility of it, the feeling of emptiness and of nothingness."

[40]This motif of flying beyond gravity's pull recurs in all her discussions of spiritual beauty.

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For Weil it does not suffice to expose oneself to literary genius, one must also "know how to receive it" which requires an act of refusal along with acceptance. So long as the imagination is allowed to function uncontrolled, it will create balances and fill up the voids which develop through malheur.[41] Because human antipathy to the feeling of emptiness is so strong, the void will not persist; it will be treated with consoling illusions and the possibility of experiencing grace will shrink. The inverse relationship between consolation for pain and supernatural reward makes patience a difficult course. Immediate gratification for all those experiences which carve out a hollow place in our soul—death or loss of purpose, betrayal, uprooting—overwhelms and blinds the afflicted but a reward of supernatural bread awaits those who hold fast to their malheur.[42]

> Men exercise their imagination in order to stop up the holes through which grace might pass, and for this purpose, and at the cost of a lie, they make for themselves idols, that is to say, relative forms of good conceived as being totally unrelated forms of good. If one conceives of them as relative, there is a void, for on reaching the degree of fatigue where the conception of relationships (which is knowledge of the 2nd kind) is destroyed, one must go on making an effort. And then the source of energy can only be supernatural bread.[43]

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[41] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 139.

[42] Ibid., p. 135, p. 198 and p. 227.

[43] Ibid., p. 145.

Few are able to discern that there is something more than momentary relief because there is no instruction of the distressed about God's implicit love. Weil bitterly acknowledges that the pap of political propaganda or romantic novels assuages the afflicted. It is difficult to offer supernatural bread to those who wish to see, feel and touch solutions that will rid them of pain; but only the impossible will feed the impossible.[44]

Beauty and good share in this impossible reality which resides beyond human experience. Weil does not believe, however, that such virtues are inalterably inaccessible; she asserts only that the mysterious unity of the pair cannot be grasped.[45] Beauty is visible to all who behold this divine gift but it does not compel its beholder to consume it.

> Beauty is a sensual attraction that maintains one at a certain distance and implies a renunciation—including the most intimate form of renunciation, that of imagination. One wants to devour all other desirable objects. Beauty is something one desires without wanting to devour it. We simply desire that it should be.[46]

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[44]"This feeling of impossibility is the feeling of the void. It accompanies all true suffering and breaks through as soon as the imagination ceases for a moment to fill the void." Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 153.

[45]See "NYNtbk," p. 72 where Weil asserts the holism of beauty and the good.

[46]Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 335.

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Beauty teaches the afflicted the patience required to await supernatural support but it is rarely made available to those most in need. Rather, Weil observes, substitute materials (the type of popular literature she deplores and commercial advertisements which she names in her attack on immoral literature) clutter the way.

There are certain parallels in Weil's theory of beauty and of work, the most striking being the break with imagination's tenacious hold; but work is a forward movement, a seizing of the materials of nature, while beauty requires the absence of movement. One consumes matter as a means, one abstains and looks as an end—this distinguishes work and beauty respectively.[47] Both follow a mandate to obey—work adheres to the limits set by the physical world while beauty to the supernatural. "The beautiful" she writes "is the necessary which, whilst remaining in accordance with its own law and with it alone, obeys the good."[48]

Work and beauty are connected in a New Testament reading by Weil of God's engagement in the world. The Father, who is the Supreme Artisan, created a work which

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[47]Her classic distinction between eating and looking is introduced here. While labor incurs malheur under the present conditions of oppression, beauty also knows affliction. "To contemplate what cannot be contemplated (the affliction of another), without running away, and to contemplate the desirable without approaching—that is what is beautiful." ("NYNtbk.," p. 71)

[48]Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 379.

is our ordered universe, beautiful in a transcendent sense.[49] But it is the Son's continuation of the work, in perfecting the order through human engagement, that brings beauty to our sight. Beauty radiates from "Christ's tender smile coming through matter."[50] The Incarnation is proven possible she adds because of beauty.

Beauty is as elusive as it is dazzling, demanding special consideration by those who would choose to describe it.

> Whenever one reflects upon the beautiful one is brought up against a blank wall. Everything that has been written upon the subject is miserably and obviously inadequate, because it is a study which must take God as its starting point.[51]

An aesthetic theory which disclaims that beauty begins and ends in the transcendent is illusory. Similarly, workers of all description will miss the beauty of the world if they do not love it first:

> The beauty of the world is the order of the world that is loved. . . . The artist, the scholar, the philosopher, the contemplative should really admire the world and pierce through the film of unreality that veils it and makes of it, for nearly all men at nearly every moment of their lives, a dream or stage set. They ought to do this but more often than not they cannot manage it.[52]

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[49]"Forms of Impl. Love," WG, p. 164: "The beauty of the world is the cooperation of divine wisdom in creation." Note also Weil's allusion to Zeus as creator, a weaver of the cloth which is the sea, a "web of limit and the unlimited." ("NYNtbk.,", p. 277).

[50]Ibid., p. 165.

[51]"London Ntbk.," p. 341.

[52]"Forms of Impl. Love," p. 170.

An artist must work through divine inspiration to avoid the thickness of illusion and this requires that the soul remain open; the void must not be filled with imaginative materials. The affliction experienced, the emptiness that is intolerable, brings the artist to Christ; together they carry the Cross.[53]

Works of art, considered to be of the "first order" in Weil's terms, are expressions of the eternal reality; they are never playful nor do they satisfy material need alone.[54] In imitating the beauty of the universe they reflect the verities of space and time—the impossible unity that lies on the other side of vision and sound. Accordingly, Weil points to the artistic crafts as essentially paradoxical in purpose:

> A poem is beautiful to the precise degree in which the attention, whilst it was being composed, has been turned toward the inexpressable.[55]

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[53]Weil elaborates upon unity and duality, the artist being driven by the latter toward the former: "The Cross is this duality. In order to find the One, we have to exhaust duality, go to the very extreme." Its course is impossible but so too is God. (Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 436).

[54]The connection between art and necessity is critical: "Every work of art celebrates necessity . . ." (Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 113); art would be play if it was absent; "what would it express?" she asks. ("PWNtbk.," p. 26. Art and science ought to be concerned with the relations of cause and effect, science as the "theory of work" and art "as a symbol of work" . . .; art is "work divorced from utility." "PWNtbk," p. 16 (Weil's emphasis). Artist and scientist are equally responsible for attention to the rich details of reality and a scrupulous avoidance of surface explanation or representation.

[55]Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 412; also Ntbk., Vol. 1, pp. 4 & 5.

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> The most beautiful kind of music is that which gives the maximum intensity to the movement of silence, which constrains the listener to listen to the silence.[56]
>
> Perfect music contains the maximum amount of monotony that is bearable; the least possible amount of change consistent with the maintenance of the attention at the same degree of intensity.[57]
>
> All great painting gives the following impression, that God is in contact with a point of view regarding the world, with a perspective of it, without either the painter or the person admiring the picture being there to disturb the tête-à-tête. Whence comes the silence contained in all great painting.[58]
>
> Poetry. Images and words that reflect the mental state without images and words. Music. Sounds that reflect the mental state without sounds. Words and sounds equivalent to silence.[59]

The conditions for making a near perfect copy of the universe's beauty require the transformation of the obvious signs of an art form as well as the subordination of the self to divine inspiration. The true artist is not the cause but the means of the created object, acting through transcendent purpose.[60]

Perhaps the most ironic twist Weil offers to her discussion of the artist's relationship to beauty is the

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[56] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 500.

[57] Ibid., p. 554.

[58] Ibid., p. 381.

[59] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 63.

[60] Cond. Prem., pp. 264 -5; Weil exudes joy in this remark: " . . . c'est un lumiere d'eternité; c'est la beaute!"

denial of talent as an advantage. As in her critique of literature, she is adamant in her distinction between those who are acknowledged writers and those who possess genius; the latter, few in number, have been touched by the divine grace which infuses their effort. We know this, she reiterates, because their effort communicates the "real" as necessity and love. This ability is not restricted to literary and artistic practitioners. "Physical work is a specific contact with the beauty of the world," Weil writes because it deals with the plentitude of material necessary. "Aching in every limb," fatigued and disheartened by the weight of malheur, the laborer is intimately acquainted with the realities of matter bearing its truth "in his flesh like a thorn." If the conditions would allow for it, where the heads of the manual workers were lifted and their gaze fixed upon the eternal beauty that lies beyong the workroom, they would be lovers of the "Real."

> That is the immense privilege God has reserved for his poor. But they scarcely ever know it. No one tells them. Excessive fatigue, harassing money worries, and the lack of true culture prevent them from noticing it. A slight change in these conditions would be enough to open the door to a treasure. It is heart-rending to see how easy it would be in many cases for men to procure a treasure for their fellows and how they allow centuries to pass without taking the trouble to do so.[61]

The spiritual passage that Weil took between 1934 and 1939 provided continuity between her factory experience and the articulation of a theology of work. Her restless-

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[61]"Forms," p. 170.

ness subsided as she moved through the rich vistas of the Mediterranean. The haunting sounds of the Portugese songs, the chants of the Benedictine monks, her own disciplined recitation of "Love" and the "Our Father" lifted her beyond bodily pain into a tranquil space.[62] The very conditions that precipitated her physical and spiritual crisis during the months in the factory became the components of her theology of work and aesthetic theory. The negative emerges as positive.[63]

Malheur, the affliction which deprives laborers of their humanity, drives out distraction and empties the soul —a pre-condition to receive supernatural grace. Among the enslaved, an invisible, an inaudible transformation occurs in those who wait patiently for the loving embrace of God. But this change, Weil reminds her readers, is an impossible one, requiring impossible faith among those condemned to inexpressable affliction. The door opens only to those who are not caught in the vicious swing of survival: to work to eat, to eat to work—the repetition that casts a grim shadow over all. The shadow represents the monolithic pendulum that propels the laborer through the exhausting day and hides any glimmer of light. The presence of a beautiful vision or sound would make a difference, Weil surmises,

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[62]See "Spirit. Autob.," p. 67: " . . . the possibility of loving divine love in the midst of affliction."

[63]Note P. Bugnion-Secretan, Simone Weil (Neuchatel), p. 203.

transforming the monotonous swing of life into a harmonious unity; the clock of the cosmos—balanced and complete—would regulate life.

The artist, like the laborer, provides space for God's presence through deep compassion for human affliction. This compassion is deepened by the artist's surrender of personal end. "If sometimes a work of art seems almost as beautiful as the sea, the mountains, or flowers," Weil writes, "it is because the light of God has filled the artist."[64] The artist's work invites the observer to look, to stand back and perceive God's magnaminity; beauty is a "powerful incentive."

> Just as God hastens into every soul immediately it opens, even a little, in order through it to love and serve the afflicted, so he descends in all haste to love and admire the tangible beauty of his own creation through the soul that opens to him.
>
> But the contrary is still more true. The soul's natural inclination to love beauty is the trap God most frequently uses in order to win it and open it to the breath from on high.[65]

The Drama of the City

> God would not permit that something so beautiful be destroyed. . . . To harm Venice! Her beauty defends her better than soldiers, better than statesmen![66]

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[64]"Love of God," p. 130. [65]"Forms," p. 163.

[66]Venise sauvée, Poèmes, Violetta's words to Jaffier, Act II.

Venice's reputation as the most beautiful city in the world encouraged Simone Weil to omit it from her itinerary on the first trip to Italy fearing that she would betray her newly formed allegiance to Florence. She chanced this seduction the following year and, although the record is scant with respect to her visit, proof abounds that she did become enamored of that city on the Adriatic.[67] Two years after this experience she began to write her only composition for the theatre which was dedicated to the enduring beauty of Venice. Venise sauvée (Venice Preserved), although unfinished at the time of her death, became a significant part of her writing life representing her passage through aesthetic and spiritual inquiry.[68]

In spite of the incomplete status of the manuscript which was to have been a three act tragedy, it represents a comprehensive treatment of an emerging theology of work which focuses upon spiritual labor as the basis of a new social order.[69] The meaning of beauty is conveyed through

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[67]Mary McCarthy suggests something of the traditional rivalry between the two cities in her study, Venice Observed, N.Y., Harvest Books, 1965. Her contrast between Florence and Venice offers a glimpse into what Weil might well have discerned: "The Florentines were intellectuals, the Venetians were not . . . . The Florentines who were incapable of ruling themselves, produced a great theorist of government: Machievelli. The Venetians had no theorists and evolved a model Republic" (p. 105-6).

[68]See Letter #52, written in 1943, p. 168. Weil indicates to her parents that she would like certain passages of her play published with her poems; she left several copies of the manuscript behind with trusted friends when she left France.

[69]William Burford, Simone Weil's Venise sauvée, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University, unpubl. dissertation,

her characters presenting a firm statement about the critical need for its preservation in a world driven by those who have lost the ability to see. The use of this artistic form enabled her to experiment with questions of reality and illusion and confront the mystery of faith and love through tragic action.

The decision to write for the theatre reflects both Weil's abiding attraction for classical tragedy and her impatience with the production of more modern expressions of drama. Upon attending the performance of Giraudoux's Electra she mused about her own version and wrote her friend Posternak that she would like to write tragedy.[70] Her plan to revise Electra never materialized although she prepared a number of translations from Greek tragedy and wrote several short essays on the subject.[71] In this writing she identified the characteristics she believed critical to great tragedy and discovered that there was considerable likeness between these standards and her understanding of

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1966; this is the best available work on Weil's tragedy and I have drawn upon its text throughout the discussion which follows.

[70] See Letter #31, 1938, to Posternak, p. 89.

[71] See the collected materials published in English in Intimations of Christianity, passim; most have been published in two distinct collections in French.

the Christian faith. All of the major tragic figures are innocents who become victims of a power more crushing than they could have realized. Prometheus and Isaiah, Weil notes, are Christ-like in their respective suffering, enduring humiliation and sorrow in their mission of love. Antigone, Hippolytus, Electra and King Lear are heroic not only because they fall prey to awesome destinies but because they endure in serenity; this acceptance of one's fate distinguished them from other characters in tragedy and history who have met a harsh circumstance. In their bearing, which Weil regards as a form of madness, they communicate obedience to necessity and a love that is greater than mortal survival. Antigone is exemplary:

> Among the Greek poets, Sophocles is the one whose quality of inspiration is the most visibly Christian and perhaps the most pure (he is to my knowledge much more Christian than any other tragic poet of the last twenty centuries). This Christian quality is generally acknowledged in the tragedy of Antigone, which might be an illustration of the saying: "We ought to obey God rather than men."[72]

At the heart of Weil's theory of tragedy is the notion of Christ's Passion and the role of redemptive suffering. True heroes must be victims to malheur and silently comply with the mission that is set for them by others; they are not passive actors in their fate but

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[72]"God's Quest for Man," Intim., p. 8; note that it is Antigone who was chosen by Weil to be the first heroic figure for elucidation in the factory journal, Entre nous in 1936.

sacrificial ones who act to save loved ones. The task of tragedy, according to Weil, is to involve those who are disposed to passivity. She had learned in her factory experience that people who suffer rarely reach out to their coworkers who share in affliction. It is the instinct for self-preservation that erodes compassion and the tragedian must act to restore the natural empathy of whole human beings; slavery had consumed the parts of the soul that revealed the caring and tender inclinations. She reasoned:

> There is no man, however hard-hearted, who does not feel compassion about the afflictions presented in the theatre. This is because he can be disinterested; he has nothing to gain and no fear of danger of contamination. So he can lose himself in the characters of the play. He gives full reign to his compassion, because he knows the situation is unreal. If it was real he would turn as frigid as ice . . .
>
> The man who has devoted all his desire to the good is as freely compassionate at all times as the spectator is in the theatre.[73]

Weil's interest in the theatre was instructional and transforming; she sought to inform her audience about the manifest presence of affliction and she wished to change the impulse to narcissism. She understood that the theatre was the antithesis of the real, that the spectator sought out entertainment that would transport the mundane ugliness of life to another domain. But Weil embraced the stage precisely because it conveyed at once the real and the illusory. In a paradoxical sense the

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[73]"NYNtbk.," p. 319.

theatre was the microcosm of the world's relationship to God and, as Burford mentions, the unseen hero of her own drama was the supernatural. "The theatre," she commented, "ought to render exterior and interior necessity sensible."[74]

Perhaps an even more important reason for the theatre's allure was that it permitted the author to be transparent; through another (the actor) lines are spoken and a message delivered. Throughout Weil's writing she reiterates her desire to fade as a barrier between two realities; she emphasizes this in her comments on the artist's function and the purity of the "tête-à-tête" between the real author of beauty and the observer. Her impulse to disappear was intricately tied to her horror of compulsion. She indicted all who imposed ideas and approaches upon others as idolators and she shrunk from the thought of proselytizing. Her plan for the play was to entice the audience to look, much in the manner that she did before the da Vinci work, and to discover for themselves—without external pressure—the intrinsic value of the message.[75] In writing about the development of a scene she remarked: "On the scene—the slow development of an act with the universe turning—until the act hurls itself into the world."[76] Thus, it was through the inner experience of the actor and the

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[74]"Notes," Venise sauvée, p. 52.

[75]See Burford's discussion of this point and his reference to Cabaud, p.6.

[76]Venise sauvée, p. 52.

spectator that the stirring momentum would begin; a transference which takes illusion as its starting place and moves it to real compassion. This was Weil's hope for melting the cold of heart.

Although the composition of a tragedy was a departure for Simone Weil she had engaged in writing literary materials many years before the splendors of Italy inspired her to artistic expression. In her tenth year she wrote a prose poem about "fire sylphs" which reveals something of her later preoccupation with the heroic character.[77] Youthful as the composition may be, its structure and themes express her life-long attraction to symbolism and the persistence of good in the face of hardship.[78] For the traditional celebration of St. Charlemagne at the Henri-IV Lycée, she was asked to write a poem on the subject of that saint's worthy deeds.[79] Her effort is particularly interesting because it anticipates a mood and characterization of heroism that will recur in Venise sauvée. Not the male saint but the female patron of Paris, St.

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[77]"Les Lutins du feu," Poèmes, pp. 37-39.

[78]Cabaud notes the use of Greek vocables and certain sentences which have an odd philosophical ring . . ." (p. 20). The hero Phaidros manages to marry his intended only after surviving a dangerous trial which almost took his life. See Pétrement, pp. 20-21.

[79]Note the editor's "Notes" in Poèmes, indicating that the poem was written in 1926 and read for the celebration. "Vers lus au goûter de la Saint-Charlemagne" appear in that volume, pp. 16-20.

Geneviève, is celebrated in this poem and it is her preserving inaction, rather than a physically aggressive engagement in warfare, that underpins Weil's enthusiasm. While the city slept this pure figure kept a watch over its inhabitants.[80]

By the time Weil reached her twentieth birthday she had set aside literary efforts for expressions she undoubtedly felt were less frivolous.[81] The experience in Italy, however, kindled her latent interest in art and encouraged her to integrate the two strains in her writing: the artistic and the political. Even during her sojourn in Italy she had continued to reflect upon political events, certainly to evade fascist propaganda, and had studied Machievelli's essays. The two seemed to merge as one passion after she returned to France and clearly surface as "slopes" of reality in her tragedy about Renaissance Venice.

Questions about political power had intrigued Weil long before her college years and lured her to engage in the politics of labor before her factory experience. She had traveled to Germany in the early thirties and written

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[80]The figure of Violetta about whom more will be said, infra, resembles St. Geneviève and the circumstances of Venice those of Paris; see Burford, pp. 74-75.

[81]See editor's introduction to Poèmes for a complete list of the poems written in her youth.

about the dangers of German and Russian intrigue for various left wing journals.[82] But her interest in politics had taken a different turn in the last few years of that decade, reflecting her fascination with the unchanging verities of oppression and subjugation. She read avidly from the texts of ancient historians, from documents and chronicles of the middle ages, and the accounts of more modern historical figures.[83] It was, perhaps, a search into the roots of European history in order to grasp an understanding of the developments that were occurring rapidly and with terrifying implications for the French; it was, perhaps, a search for clues to survival and a more humane destiny for the citizens who were removed from policy making.

Homer's Iliad and the historical accounts of Thucydides represent the two most important works in Weil's preparation for her playwriting activity; together they provided the theme of inexorable suffering of the weak at the hands of the strong. The ancient poet's narrative of the Trojan war prompted Weil to compose a long essay about the consequences of force, describing how the web of brutality captures and destroys all who enter into

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[82] See Pétrement's treatment, Ch. 6 passim.

[83] Ibid., p. 345 & p. 365; among her favorites: Thucydides, Saint-Réal, Cardinal de Retz and Richelieu.

the field of combat.[84] Her attachment to Thucydides was in his treatment of justice in the confrontation of the Athenians with the citizens of Melos.[85] She is haunted by the seeming immutability of the law that holds that the powerful will not restrain themselves from assuming maximum power: "As touching the gods we have the belief, and as touching men the certainty" Weil quotes Thucydides here, "that always, by a necessity of nature, each one commands wherever he has the power."[86] In large measure her dramatic subject is an amplification of the themes expounded by these Greek writers, probing the meaning of human vulnerability in the wake of seemingly inhuman cruelty. Although her action is set in an Italian city in the early seventeenth century, its concerns stretch back to antiquity and forward through the events of the Second World War, which Weil would participate in, until the present time.

The political reality of her own day was an essential factor in determining the focus Weil chose for her tragedy. The fall of Paris to the German occupation forces

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[84]Ibid., p. 363; Pétrement observes that the tragic dimensions of Homer's work provided the "accent" in all of Weil's later writing.

[85]See "Forms," pp. 140-141.

[86]Ibid., p. 141; also, Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 182.

was a nightmare although she had expected Hitler's army to advance across the borders of the Continent.[87] Pétrement believes that the play had been started before she fled from her home and traveled south with her parents; whether this was the fact or not, the possession of a city by foreign troops emerged as the central theme of the drama.

Other dramatists had chosen to write about the political intrigues of Venetian ambassadors and mercenaries during the Renaissance but only Weil chose to emphasize the tragic as the plight of the city.[88] She wished to dramatize the melancholic destiny of transpersonal realities and show that individual fates are only facets of a larger tragedy. Some controversy surrounds the question of her indebtedness to Thomas Otway, the English Restoration playwright who composed the earlier tragedy of the same title Weil had chosen.[89] Burford's analysis is mildly critical of Cabaud's

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[87]Her political commentaries during the last half of the decade explore the character of Hitler's urge to expansion; see Pétrement, Ch. 13, passim; note the essays addressed to this problem in Écrits historiques et politiques, some of which have been translated and published in Selected Essays.

[88]Note Burford's excellent review of sources, Ch. 2, passim; among her predecessors are Otway, Lafosse and von Hofmannstahl; Voltaire and Byron also incorporated aspects of this episode in their own respective works for the theatre.

[89]Venice Preserved, or a Plot Discovered, ed. M. Kelsall, Lincoln, Univ. of Nebraska, 1969; Otway's play was performed twelve years after the publication of Saint-Réal's work in 1682.

on this point, arguing that the evidence for her derivation of materials from the Englishman is scanty but that a strong inference can be made that Weil had read the famous seventeenth century version.[90] Both writers derived their subject from the same text—the Abbé Saint-Réal's semi-historical narrative of a conspiracy by mercenaries to hand the Venetians over to the Spanish crown.[91] While both departed from the original account, Weil understood her tragedy to be a close reading of the French text.

The matter of proximity to the original account is not a trivial one for Weil. In communicating her insights through the vehicle of drama she was circumspect about the imposition of imaginative materials upon her audience. She desired to hold their attention and convey the messages of affliction and beauty through a story that had historical significance. She gave credence to Saint-Réal's account and took both the historians to task who did not and, most certainly, would have done the same for Otway's interpretation. In effect, her emphasis is a "purification" of the English play; where he chose to direct the action, she shied away. Otway's principal theme was the tragic destiny met by

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[90] Pétrement states that Weil referred to Otway specifically: "She said that Otway and others had not understood the nobility of the motive . . ." (p. 365).

[91] César Vichard de Saint-Réal, Conjuration des Espagnols contre la république de Venice en l'année MDCXVIII (Conspiracy of the Spanish Against the Venetian Republic in 1618), published in 1674.

the lovers who helplessly became entrapped in political misfortune. Weil's antipathy to sentimentalizing literature was well established in her literary criticism and there is every reason to believe that she would have found Otway's lens clouded with romantic distortion.[92]

The plot of the conspiracy, as well as Saint-Réal's and Weil's plot, is reviewed in the "Notes" accompanying the manuscript of Venise sauvée; her impatience with historical manipulation of what she believes to be credible surfaces:

> The Marquis of Bedmar, ambassador to Venice from Spain, conceived in 1618 a plan to place Venice through a conspiracy in the power of the Spanish king who controlled at the time most of Italy. Wishing to remain obscure in his position as ambassador, he confided the execution of the plan to Renaud, an aging French exile and to Pierre, a Provencal pirate, who was a respected sailor and captain. Renaud was charged with the preparation and Pierre with the military operations of the plot. A large party of mercenary troops garrisoned in Venice and many of the officers who were aliens were paid in the service

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[92] Otway's editor remarks: "Political idealism or lust for plunder provide the driving force for Saint-Réal's characters; love and sexual desire are the ostensible forces in Otway's." (M. Kelsall, ed., p. xvi). The curious and perhaps uncanny fact is that both Weil and Otway shared a tragic end to their own lives, the former at the age of thirty-four, allegedly of starvation. Otway died in his thirty-third year and starvation seems to have precipitated his death as well. In Theophilus Cibber's Lives of the Poets the story is told that after years of struggling with poverty and excruciating hunger, Otway, having received a sum from begging, purchased some bread and in his ravenous condition ate it too quickly and choked to death. See Otway, Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 20 (11th Edition), pp. 376-7 (1911).

> of Venice. The plan was to strike by surprise, in the deep of night, simultaneously occupying important points of the city, igniting fires at the same time in all quarters to spread confusion and killing all those who attempted to resist. The eve of Pentecost was chosen as the night. Jaffier, one of the conspiracy's leaders, would reveal the plot to the Council of Ten out of pity for the city and destroy the plot. Some historians, above all the Spanish, deny the authenticity of this conspiracy but with very weak arguments. It is certain, in all events, that the Council of Ten executed several hundred men and forced Bedmar to leave Venice.[93]

Nothing of Simone Weil's unique understanding of the narrative is revealed in this long passage; it neither suggests the theory of tragic action that animated her cast nor discloses the spiritual richness of the script. One indication of her distinctive approach is the symbolic meaning which clothes her personae. Another is the subtlety of her mystical motifs which play upon the ideas of secrecy in the human condition and the fragility of existence. This last motif weaves like an invisible thread through the tragedy reminding the audience that "the vulnerability of precious things is beautiful, because it is a sign of existence."[94] Violetta, her female hero, embodies this as did Socrates, learning to play the lyre while awaiting his execution. She wants her readers

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[93] Venise sauvée, p. 53; see Burford, pp. 22-25; note also McCarthy's discussion of the episode which indicates the puzzlement of the Venetians on Ascension Day upon meeting three hanging bodies in St. Mark's place: "A Spanish conspiracy, some said; more likely a French conspiracy, others decided . . ." (p. 41).

[94] "N.Y.Ntbk.," p. 72.

and spectators to appreciate the delicacy of relationship without reducing this feeling to a sentimental (and temporary) sympathy. She had written that there was "no greater sacrilege than insensitiveness towards those who suffer" and intended to evoke a lasting response toward human affliction.[95]

Weil's interpretation of secrecy is intricate. The main story is, after all, about a conspiracy which is to be kept secret but is revealed before its horrific consequences for the city develop. On another level, the divine protection of Venice is secret as is supernatural reality for all humankind. The prime mover of the evil to be perpetrated is never present on the stage—the Spanish ambassador—but his identity is not an absolute secret; the chief conspirators know full well the origin and purpose of their mission. Weil wishes to contrast the difference, in this play upon the play, between the gentle presence of the absent God and the forceful intention of the absent God and the forceful intention of the absent representative of the Spanish crown. Her contrast is essential to her theology of divine withdrawal and the persistence of evil in human affairs.

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[95]In her essay on "Prometheus," from which this quote is taken, the Suppliant Zeus epitomizes the ambiguity of those who lean toward the sufferer and also away from such pain. This theme recurs in her drama (Intim., p. 73).

Weil's attraction to the symbolism of Pythagorean mathematics is reflected in her arrangement of personae who appear as sets of triads. Undoubtedly da Vinci's "secret" of artistic equilibrium prompted her to experiment with her cast of characters and the idea of harmony and tension between and among protagonists. All but one of the four sets represent members of the conspiracy: three officers, three mercenaries and three leaders. Among the last which possesses something akin to the notion of brush strokes described by Weil in her discussion of the Last Supper are Renaud, the older exile, and Pierre; Jaffier, the hero, suggests the focal point of her composition. The fourth, counter-set, is composed of Venetians who relate to one another in pairs and hint at certain Gospel themes Weil was most interested in. The Secretary of the Council of Ten could be Pontius Pilate to Jaffier's final judgment and Bassio, his favorite and trusted servant the populus of Rome in an earlier trial. Two workers accompany Bassio in the final scenes of the tragedy, one an artisan (who is softer in disposition) and the other an apprentice; both symbolize the ill-fated position of skilled workers in the modern age, sharing in the execution of the Council's orders to cast the hero from the city's boundaries. Finally, Weil creates two female roles which portray respectively sexual and spiritual love; the virgin Violetta and the Courtesan might

well be expressions of the two Mary figures of the New Testament.[97]

Weil exploited the visual setting of Venice, recognizing in the sea's horizons an image of the infinite. The proximity to the Adriatic enhanced her symbolism but even more useful to her purpose was the city's annual celebration of the betrothal of the sea and the Doge as representative of Venice. This symbolic enactment framed her drama, providing a sense of forthcoming joy among the citizens. She appreciated this traditional marriage of water and land as a Christian ritual, sacramental in the mystical unification of spirit and matter; in much the same manner, she understood the festivity which she placed at Pentecost as the merging of supernatural and human work.[98] Having

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[97]Note the discussion in Mary McCarthy, V.O., p. 130 concerning the two women painted by Veronese and their relationship to Weil's personae: "There are two Veronese dominions. One is ruled by a fat woman who looks rather like the Empress Maria Theresa. The other is ruled by a young woman with a delicate pensive face and an intent, halted, listening expression . . . these joint monarchs—the jowled empress and the fair, thoughtful young queen—are always Venice in her dual aspect." Weil wrote of Giorgone's art as spiritual and was not impressed with Veronese; McCarthy's assessment of the former as the most "transfixing" of Venetian painters indicates why Weil became attached to Giorgone.

[98]McCarthy writes that the "Wedding of the Adriatic" is celebrated on Ascension Day, not Pentecost but Weil had presumably chosen to play upon the motif of descent and human hope through divine grace. Venice's ritual had increased Weil's recognition of its pure beauty; Burford remarks that she had a "sense of sacredness of certain beautiful cities in human history."

chosen to place her action in relation to the motif of the Holy Spirit's descent Weil charged her theme of joyous anticipation with a double meaning.

Weil's sensitivity to staging is further elaborated in her instructions about time and place. All of the drama occurs near St. Mark's square with the lagoon in sight of its actors. The drama begins in the dark of night with an exchange of mercenaries sequestered in the Courtesan's quarters; they are speaking of secret matters regarding the city's destiny. The second act is dramatically contrasted with the first, the action occurring from a high place in the light of day; Weil indicates that the Campanile might be the correct place for her characters to reveal to one another their respective aspirations and motives. From this bright location the anti-hero will instruct the hero in the arts of statesmanship and the heroine will share her love. Night dominates the final act until the final moments when the dawn's first light illuminates the sea. This third act is played out on the Piazetta, a public place where the obscure fades in the openness of the scenario.[99]

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[99] Burford writes: "it is precisely to render the sense of infinity, after the almost claustrophobic intolerableness of the finitude in which Jaffier finds himself caught, that Simone Weil will turn from the square to the lagoon and the sea beyond, in the very last scene of Venise sauvée." (p. 49).

A use of double images weaves through Venise Sauvée exhibiting the integration of Weil's theological and artistic achievement. Absence and presence, frenzy and motionlessness, lengthy discourse and reticence infuse her tragedy animating the view of God's distance and the need for patient faith. Each of Weil's central figures echoes the words another has delivered intensifying the meaning and reinforcing the sense of ambiguity that lies at the core of the tragedy. This strategy also suggests the ubiquity of her theory of reading (lecture) where truth surfaces only after many readings of the same text. McCarthy recognized the echoing motif in the physical reality of Venice, giving additional support to Weil's use of it in her composition.[100] According to McCarthy, a "twinning" theme appears throughout Venice, the pedestrian cannot escape seeing the double of certain architectural and sculptured forms. "Venice is a kind of pun," she observes, "a mirror held up to its own shimmering image."[101] There is a deceptive aspect to this

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[100] Although McCarthy translated Weil's Iliad prior to the publication of her study of Venice, she makes no mention of Venise sauvée. It is possible that she had not read the play but it is unlikely that she did not know of its existence. Her text refers only to Otway's version of the conspiracy.

[101] V.O., p. 13; this observation is abundantly illustrated throughout her discussion, note the following: "The great pink church of the Friari is echoed on the other side of the city by the great pink church of the Dominicans . . . . The famous tromp-l'oeil . . . is itself a sort of twinning or unending duplication . . ." (p. 14).

beautiful city which teases the eye and confounds judgment. Venice she explains is theatrical, its facades most glorious through "tricks of stage make-up," never "to be seen in the round" because the rear of the buildings are a shame to the visitor.[102] Nothing in Weil's writings suggests this theatrical duplicity in Venice's appearance but she clearly anticipates McCarthy's absorption in the matter of what is real and what is illusory; her cast of characters plays out this problem.[103]

There were obviously many reasons why Venice was selected as her subject. There is one more that emerges from her historical writings about the Renaissance and the failure of its actors to fully incorporate the Christian message in their retrieval of classic materials. She wrote that the Renaissance had "scarcely touched the fringe of the central inspiration" which she located in the tragedies of Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus whose prescience of the Christian message seemed to persevere only in the spirit

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[102] Ibid., pp. 105-106.

[103] McCarthy locates illusion, in part, in the odd juxtaposition of modern technological fixtures and centuries old architecture: "The things of this world reveal their essential absurdity when they are put in the Venetian context. In the unreal realm of the canals, as in a Swiftian Liliput, the real world, with its contrivances, appears as a vast folly" (p. 18, McCarthy's emphasis).

of the Franciscan monks and the citizens of Languedoc. Traces of this original inspiration might also reside in the ritual wedding of the Venetian doge to the Adriatic Sea and, perhaps, exempt Venice from the negative judgment Weil laid upon the "false Renaissance."[104] The expansiveness of the Renaissance according to her critique fed the appetite for political power and nourished the mentality of the "Great Beast" of her time—the invading armies of Hitler. While they crushed the beautiful cities of Europe she composed her play about one Renaissance city's preservation.[105]

Two officers exchange words about the sack of Venice as the curtain rises on the drama, announcing the ubiquity of war and the triumphant mood of soldiers deployed to foreign soil:

> We are going to see the Venetians awaken in a few hours to the last day of the great Venice. Tomorrow's dawn will rise upon them as subjects of the Spanish Crown and it is we who will have accomplished this great thing. We a handful of exiles . . .[106]

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[104]Burford believes that it is not the ritual that survived the Renaissance but an earlier enactment of the ritual wedding that would have been congenial to Weil's "spiritual conception." "The spirit of the earlier doges who went to the sea to be cleansed would have appealed to Simone Weil's imagination, but that of the doges who went to assert their power over the sea would have been repugnant to her" (p. 389). See Weil, "Forms," pp. 161-162, regarding her antipathy towards the Renaissance.

[105]Note "The Romanesque Renaissance" in S.E., pp. 44-54; the question of Weil's attitudes toward the "Great Beast" and history will be resumed in Ch. 4.

[106]V.S., p. 55; the first act closes echoing this sentiment: "At the next dawning this city will be prostrate at our feet and we will be the masters" (p. 64).

This basic theme of settled and rooted people which appears in all of Weil's thought pervades the tragedy of a city. She believed that lost identity and purpose (the past and future) evoked among its victims a sense of boredom and restlessness and recognized in her soldiers the very quality which she first observed in the factory.[107] Malheur disarms and makes those in its grip figures who should be sympathized with; thus she wrote in her notes that she wished to "render as sympathetic as possible" the conspirators. She wanted the audience to immediately identify with soldiers and not to shift their allegiance until Jaffier undergoes an "awakening." He will then feel compassion for the citizens of Venice who are asleep through the first act and innocent of the conspiracy in the second.

The first act is dominated by various exchanges between the leaders of the plot, each offering enough information about himself that the differences in motive become clear before the action of the next act. Renaud epitomizes the completely worldly figure, ambitious and lacking in attachment for anything or anybody. His voice is untempered in words of license and brutality, his bearing ruthless and his arguments facile. He warns Pierre against forming attachments: "In order to be a successful

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[107] In the notes Weil writes: "In the first act—and the second—make it obvious that this is a plot of exiles, of uprooted . . . Disgust from monotonous existence underpins the background. Evoke ennui" (pp. 43-44).

conspirator you must love no one."[108] Although Pierre is otherwise seduced by Renaud's dreams of glory and power he is devoted to his friend Jaffier and will not hear of a plan to murder him. Renaud senses that the hero is suspect because he has shown a softness toward the citizens and would have him destroyed for the sake of security. Pierre demonstrates the fool-hardy character of this brutal step, thereby saving his friend's life; he calls upon the soldiers to attest to the natural leadership and popularity of Jaffier. Renaud submits but against his better judgment, warning Pierre that they may live to regret the decision.[109]

While Renaud is surrounded by dreams of greatness and Pierre with loyalty to his friend, Jaffier stands alone; an isolotate neither enthusiastically drawn to the sack of Venice nor fully committed to male friendship. Thus he shares the void in past and future attachment although his dedication to Pierre is genuine. They are both Provencials who have evidently shared a common history; this

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[108] V.S., p. 64. Renaud conveys the qualities of sophistry that Plato attacked with a vehemence—talented in matters of state and lacking in morality.

[109] Renaud agrees with Pierre's reasoning about Jaffier's indispensability to the plot with this qualification: " . . . listen well: I feel that your friend will destroy us. . . . You will regret not having listened to reason" (pp. 63-64). Renaud's recognition of Jaffier's failing is, of course, Weil's indication of the hero's strength: compassion for beauty.

fact adds to the symbolic meaning of virtue in her hero's character.[110] He is Weil's "perfect hero," an outsider whose love is more passionate than that of the other conspirators and whose true self remains nebulous until that love becomes clear.[111]

The second act discloses Weil's spiritual purpose through a series of exchanges which mirror those of the first.[112] Tension mounts as Pierre explains that he is being sent on a mission for the Venetians and, to avoid suspicion, must abandon his leadership in the conspiracy. His request that Jaffier assume responsibility is accepted by the wary Renaud who cannot fathom how Pierre can feel joy at his friend's potential victory and reward. Weil describes Renaud's incredulity:

> He thinks that rational beings without exception tend to exercise all the power that is theirs to exercise. This law of rational

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[110] An excellent review of the Provencial motif is given in Burford, pp. 64-71; the main idea being that the Cathari who lived in Provence before their destruction during the Albegensian Crusade held a view of sexual purity and perfectionism. Jaffier is never attracted to Violetta, or she to him, in a "carnal" love.

[111] In the notes to the play Weil writes: "To retrieve for the first time since the Greeks the tradition of a tragedy where the hero is perfect: (p. 52). Burford explains that Jaffier embodies the heroic virtues of Euripide's Hippolytus (sexual chastity), Sophocle's Antigone and Aeschylus' Prometheus, the latter exemplifying courageous determination in the face of ineluctable force (pp. 64-67).

[112] The idea of mirroring has been discussed earlier with respect to Venice's environment.

> beings appears as fixed as that of the law of gravity with respect to matter. To abstain voluntarily from power seems contrary to nature.[113]

Although Renaud finds Pierre's good wishes for Jaffier bewildering, Pierre, in his turn, understands Renaud's default: "You do not know what friendship is." In spite of this noble dictum Weil will not reward Pierre's virtue; he will suffer from his friend's betrayal; both are, after all, earthbound creatures tied to the law of gravity.

Heroism, then, does not reside in the reciprocation of friendship but in the quality of attempting to rise above the forceful and brutal implications of human nature. Jaffier's heroic character is constructed out of the notion of metaxu, a mediatory function that attempts to restore balance. He reflects the equilibrium artistically discovered by da Vinci and the mystical secret:

> The mean (metaxu) is the perfectly just man—
> $\frac{\text{God}}{\text{God-man}} = \frac{\text{God-man}}{\text{man}}$ . . . the assimilation of man to God meant the discovery of mediation.
>
> Contradiction is the mediation. Beauty: Necessity-Good. Incarnation: Man-God.[114]

Jaffier's mediatory function is dramatized in his relationship to the conspiracy and the defense of the city

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[113] V.S., p. 66.

[114] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 385 (Weil's emphasis). She writes that the just man is "a union of extreme justice with the appearance of extreme injustice." The third act will bring this characterization to fruition as Jaffier endures torture for his deed.

as well as to two opposing protagonists.[115] Renaud and Violetta represent entirely different visions of Venice's fate and contrast sharply in their respective dispositions: Renaud bespeaks violence and Violetta only a gentle delight in life. Renaud offers the hero worldly riches, promising the "fruit of victory" to the leader who exacts Thucydide's principle. It is a satanic voice which assures Jaffier that his greatest prize will be the power over a people akin to an omnipotent God.[116] Jaffier's response to Renaud's depiction of the Venetians as subjugated to malheur is ambiguous. "The truth of your words have penetrated completely and I will act accordingly." At this moment Renaud ironically becomes convinced of Jaffier's fidelity to the conspirator's cause.[117] The audience is also left with this conviction about the hero; Weil has ensnared her listeners to pay careful attention.

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[115]Weil writes that "the two poles of the act are the scenes between Ranaud-Jaffier and Violetta-Jaffier . . ." (V.S., p. 97). The tension is deepened by the contrast between Renaud and Violetta, the sophisticate and the naive.

[116]Pierre has spoken the same line—"the fruit of victory"—earlier in the second act, emphasizing the appetite of conquerors who must eat their triumph; the curse of the Garden of Eden is very much in Weil's mind; she writes in her notes about the "malediction transmise" (p. 46 & p. 48). Certainly Hitler's rhetoric of the Aryan mission is also recalled in Renaud's speech.

[117]The ambiguity of Jaffier's answer echoes in Renaud's aside, predicting that "This Jaffier is made for great things" (V.S., p. 79). He cannot know that Weil will have her hero act out of spiritual love and not with the worldly hatred Renaud expects.

UMI

Violetta's first appearance in the drama occurs at a high point between Pierre and Jaffier, "a crescendo," adding her musical joy to the harmony already struck between the two friends. She delights in sharing the Pentecost festivities, having Jaffier see the city in "its most perfect splendor" and hearing the music of Monteverdi.[118] Not until Violetta's second entrance is her position established as the antithesis to Renaud's wicked character. Weil presents her as a "happy innocent," an "infinitely precious" being in whom Jaffier experiences the incarnation of Venetian beauty.[119] She has the name of the purple flower that delicately blossoms in the Spring and her sweetness is expressed in her father's assessment of her child-like excitement about the forthcoming celebrations.[120] He tells her that she must be infatuated with someone; she responds

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[118]Weil specifically listed Monteverdi as one of the few composers she believed to be spiritually inspired. Burford asserts that she was historically accurate with respect to Monteverdi's participation at the festivities; he lived and worked in Venice during the period of the Spanish conspiracy (pp. 160-161). The motif of music was essential to her meaning, noting that "rhythms" and "theatrical pulsation" as well as the "simple repetition" of spirituals are to be incorporated in her tragedy (pp. 47 & 50).

[119]Ibid., p. 47 & p. 48.

[120]The short-lived nature of the "apple blossom" and other fragile flowers emphasizes Weil's interpretation of the vulnerability of beauty. See Burford for an excellent discussion of the symbolism of Violetta's name, pp. 71-76. In much of the folktale commentary that Weil offers in her Notebooks the theme of the delicate blossom recurs in the context of Christian sacrifice.

in the words of Weil's theology of beauty: "It seems to me that I am disposed to love. It seems to me also that I love all the universe. How many good and beautiful human beings there are, my father!"[121]

The purity and naivete of Violetta is strikingly contrasted with the bitter personality of the Courtesan. The latter appears in a pained exchange with the mercenaries who pay little attention to her words because she is a prostitute. She explains, in spite of their distraction, that her loathing for Venice is based upon the terrible injustice she has suffered at the hands of the citizens.[122] She wishes only for revenge—the plunder and rape of the families that have caused her to suffer. Although the two women never meet their voices echo one another in the joyous anticipation of Pentecost Day:

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[121] *V.S.*, p. 87; the absence of a "carnal" impulse underlies Violetta's loving reach toward all the universe.

[122] The Courtesan's history is recorded in Weil's stage notes as follows (pp. 82-83): "The Venetian governor of a Greek island where she was born (of a most noble family) seduced her after a formal promise of marriage. Her father attempted to force him to keep his promise and was assassinated. She came to Venice to demand justice but was progressively humiliated. Finding herself alone and without resources, she had to become a courtesan. She possessed all the rancor her station as a woman of elevated birth would permit, loathing Venice for its abasement of her life." Note Burford's discussion, pp. 45-47.

> Violetta: But look, father, how beautiful Venice is today in this light! Ah! She will be even more beautiful tomorrow.[123]
>
> The Courtesan: What ecstasy tomorrow will bring, watching the survivors suffocate in shame and not daring to respond to my mocking words![124]

These vengeful expectations are not heard by Jaffier but he is present during Violetta's rhapsodic testimony to Venice's beauty. He greets her open enthusiasm with passionate affirmation, telling Violetta that only God creates such wondrous beauty.[125] With that said his former ambiguity with respect to the conspiracy dissolves. He vows to preserve the beauty of Venice with his life and regrets only that he is not a native.[126]

The circumstances of personal choice intrigued Weil the playwright as much as it did the philosopher. Pétrement reports that she had been influenced since childhood by a certain folk narrative about the ambiguities and surprises of decision-making.[127] In the story of "Marie

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[123] V.S., p. 87.

[124] Ibid., p. 83.

[125] "No human is able to make something like Venice. Only God" (p. 89).

[126] Violetta is pleased with Jaffier's allegiance to the city she loves but shares her regret that he is not a Venetian. This mood of commitment without belonging serves to deepen the tragic action.

[127] Pétrement, p. 9. It should be noted that Jaffier's detachment from a homeland and the stepdaughter's lesser status are parallel expressions of affliction; both are recipients, in the final analysis, of supernatural (miraculous) reward.

of the Gold and Marie of the Tar" a modest young woman chooses the door that will yield tar but is showered by gold; she is only a stepdaughter. Her half-sister wishes for gold and secures tar. The lesson of the tale is about the role of contradiction—it produces divine reality.

> Contradiction is our path leading toward God because we are creatures, and because creation is itself a contradiction. . . . In the case of Christ . . . there is the greatest possible contradiction viewed from the angle of the creature, namely, that between the perfection of righteousness and the appearance of the worst of criminals . . . . The union of contradictions means a spiritual quartering. It is by itself a passion, and is impossible without extreme suffering.[128]

Jaffier's decision to betray his friends in order to save the city pours down intolerable malheur upon him before he opens the golden door.

The second act closes with Jaffier's soliloquy which is written in verse and echoes the pitiless sentiments of the mercenaries and the vision of omnipotence drawn by Renaud. Looking down upon the city from the heights of the Campanile he sees as if for the first time the precious quality of Venice; he rues its forthcoming obliteration:

> The city and the people and the sea appears before me.
> The peaceful city is in my hands without knowing it . . .
> The city which is there is going to disappear . . .

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[128] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 386.

> The city is still happy this evening in its splendor;
> For this evening its people still sleep secure and trusting . . .[129]

While the citizens sleep Jaffier awakens; it is a supernatural moment prompted by anguish and pity. Weil notes, "The moment of Jaffier's mediation at the end of the second act is the moment when reality enters him because he has paid attention."[130] The dramatist has clothed her hero's conversion in her own experience—the recitation of poetry in the midst of affliction and the profound discovery of transcendence through attentive love.[131]

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[129] V.S., pp. 94-96; Weil is particularly conscious of the contrast in movement and its contrary—rest; immobility of the sleeping city unaware of the impending danger, immobility of the hero to stop the conspiracy's momentum: "Movement, intense dynamism in this piece until Jaffier's monologue. The movement stops abruptly" (p. 49).

[130] V.S., p. 47. A significant theme of the second act is that of dream and imaginative projection: Renaud's vision of what the conquest will mean for the conqueror, the Courtesan's fantasy about the Venetian's humiliation, the mercenaries' savoring of rape and loot. Violetta's testimony, on the other hand, is about the real—the city, as a matter of historic fact, celebrates Pentecost. Jaffier depicts the nightmare to come and is sorrowful; his foretaste of destruction breaks the stupor that has kept him from seeing and hearing the reality around him. See Weil's notes, pp. 45-46.

[131] Weil departs from the prose form she has used for her protagonists in most of the longer passages, singling out this monologue for verse (see her notes, p. 97). Her memorization of Herbert's poem and the comforting consequences of her recitation are essential to her understanding that the supernatural takes hold of Jaffier: "time is stopped by supernatural reality. To believe in the exterior reality of the world and love it, it is one and the same thing. In the final analysis, the instrument of belief is supernatural love, even with respect to the things here below. As soon as Jaffier perceives that Venice exists . . ." (p. 48, Weil's emphasis).

UMI

The Council of Ten has been informed of the plot by Jaffier before the third act begins and its decision betrays the informer; they will not spare his friends' lives.[132] In spite of the compassion shown by the hero, the law of gravity prevails. Jaffier is only a human whose protection of Venice only delays the hand of force and shifts its victims to the conspirators themselves. "The automatic transmission of evil" stops only after redemptive suffering according to Weil and Jaffier's tragic character has yet to be tested. Violetta's father, the Secretary, had promised Jaffier a favor but he is unable to meet this obligation; the expedients of state prevent him from saving Jaffier's friends. The tensions of gravity cannot be relieved by anyone: "The false God changes suffering into violence. The true God changes violence into suffering." Thus Jaffier must undergo the most demeaning treatment by those whom he saved before the curse has ended (and the tragedy, too).[133]

Weil's sense of dramatic unity manifests itself in her return to the mood and language of the first act. But she has reversed her meaning. Where Pierre argued for Jaffier's life against the threats made by Renaud and

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[132] Of the three acts, this last is the most complete. Burford writes that the play is not sufficiently finished for a performance and must be read in conjunction with her other works to secure the fullness of her meaning (p. 16).

[133] G&G, p. 122.

succeeded in restoring trust in his friend, Jaffier fails completely. He beseeches the Secretary to take his life in exchange for the condemned men:

> Ah! Kill me, me alone, spare the lives of my friends . . .
> Save them, kill me, guard thus your oath.
> Preserve your honor. For if you kill my friends
> The entire world will know through me, never to forget,
> How Venice understood the sanctity of an promise . . .[134]

Unable to persuade the Secretary he begins to suffer debilitating guilt, seeking cover from the curious eyes of the Venetians and not wishing to be seen by the condemned. The full horror of malheur strikes him—his cries for help are unheard, his noble bearing crumbles and he feels himself the lowliest of criminals deserving of all the abuse that is soon to be heaped upon him.[135]

However, it is this agonizing affliction that saves Jaffier from the meaningless end reserved for Renaud and Pierre. They speak of their lost dreams and the anguish of dying without purpose: "I would have been governor of a great state" laments Renaud. "I was born for that. Nothingness . . . I am nothing." But Pierre does not

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[134] V.S., p. 113; Weil toys with the motif of promise in this passage suggesting that human commitment is always subject to force.

[135] Secrecy has been transformed in this act. No longer the matter of concealing the plot but Jaffier's shame impels him to avoid the recognition of others. See Burford's discussion of this point and the probable influence of Racine's Phèdre regarding hidden behavior (pp. 350-351).

mourn a destiny that never is to be his, nor is he aware that he has been betrayed by his friend Jaffier. He yearns only for the sight of his friend: "If I could only touch his hand, if his gaze was upon me! How to leave this life without ever seeing him again? I desire him in vain . . . all is empty."[136] Jaffier reflects the condition of his captured friends, powerless to stop their execution and hungering for their support he cannot change the Venetian's course. He will not meet the executioner's rope because he is destined to endure malheur until he is almost broken and then will die a soldier's death, his honor restored.[137]

Redemptive suffering dominates the final scene of Weil's tragedy and unites her hero to the tragic antecedents: Antigone, Prometheus and Christ. He shares with the others a victimization by those who cannot grasp the nobility of his deed; it is an impossible situation.

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[136]Weil explores the motif of silence and rejection in the third act, noting that Jaffier asks himself why he is not spoken to and suspecting that he is non-existent or "transformed into an animal" accepts such treatment (p. 50). This acknowledgment parallels the acceptance of the laborer in not having grievances heard or met. "The third act is comprised of two parts. Jaffier speaks and no one responds to him . . . He is spoken to and does not respond . . . In the supplications and despair of Jaffier, emphasize the silence that greets him . . . than Jaffier's silence" (p. 49, Weil's emphasis).

[137]Jaffier must experience torment until he senses a void: "Mercy is properly speaking a divine attribute. There is no human mercy. Mercy implies an infinite distance. One has no compassion for that which is near: Jaffier" (p. 48).

Jaffier incurs only contempt from the citizens whom he has saved; they see him as a Judas who betrayed his friends—far more culpable an offense than the betrayal of a city. They dislike the decision of the Council of Ten to spare his life, send him out of the city with a payment of gold and an assurance that he will never return to his beloved Venice.[138] One of his escorts, an apprentice, taunts the subdued Jaffier:

> Raise your head, dog! I would like to see the eyes of a coward . . .
> Traitor, traitor, this gold is the blood of your friends!
> He is frightened, see—all his body trembles from fear.[139]

Jaffier has been transformed from a military leader into an impotent cringing survivor. Malheur has stripped him of all his dignity. As he reaches for the gold he mutters that his reward will enable him to "hide, sleep

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[138]The law of gravity reigns in the political arena holding subjects in blind obeisance to the "Great Beast"; the workers typify the problem of distorted knowledge dependent upon all information from political officials. The separation of knowledge from performance is the key to rationalized labor and the subordination of the laborer to the bureaucrat.

[139]V.S., p. 128. It is of note that the apprentice conveys absolutely no pity for Jaffier at all; his gruffness and potential violence distinguish his behavior from that of the artisan. Weil's observations in the factory similarly distinguished unskilled and skilled workers.

and eat," a minimal existence for one who had been respected by his subordinates. His image is one of desperation not unlike the "haggard animal" depicted in Weil's opening lines to the poem Prométhée.[140] Just as the wretched condition of the beings in the poem is relieved by Prometheus' theft, Jaffier's circumstances are also improved. Not fire but gunfire provides the opportunity for the hero to escape from the abysmal degradation he seems destined to endure. The Venetians escorting him from the city identify the battle as an impossible one for the small band of conspirators that have not been captured. They agree to release Jaffier and send him to his death in this massacre; then their city will be "rid of the vermin."

Before he joins the soldiers a second transformation lifts Jaffier from his grim place, almost invisible to his escorts except for the perceptive artisan. "He has stopped. See how he smiles. Has he become mad?"[141] The qualities that the Venetian sees are those which Weil attributes to great tragic figures: serenity, immobility and obedience.[142]

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[140] Jaffier represents in one person the oppressed and the redeemer; he must sacrifice himself in payment for saving Venice.

[141] "Physical suffering carried to the extreme limit, without the slightest consolation, because it is accompanied by utter and complete moral distress—this is the whole of Time and Space entering into a few moments and into the lowest depths of a single body, and rending the soul. It is thus, and not in any other way, that the soul makes the return journey which God has made to come to it" (Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 429).

[142] Perhaps the sharpest dichotomy drawn in the play is that of movement and immobility; the latter is essential to the reception of grace. Ironically, Jaffier is released to action when the calm of supernatural light enters his soul.

Darkness and light contrast in the last moments of the drama.[143] As Jaffier dies he speaks of his loss of vision, despairing that he will never again watch the dawn rise over Venice. Violetta comes on stage alone, innocent of the violence that has occurred in the night. Her words are joyous, yet they echo those spoken by the dying Jaffier:

> Day that comes so beautifully, smile suspended
> Suddenly upon my city and its hundred canals,
> How many humans who receive your peace
> See the day is sweet!
>
> Never before had sleep
> So refreshed my heart as this night.
> But the day has come, sweeter to my eyes
> Than sleep.
>
> See, the long awaited holiday
> Wakens the stones and water of the city.
> A tremor in the still silent air
> Arises everywhere.
>
> Your joy is here, come and see my city.
> Bride of the sea, look far and near
> Everywhere the murmuring waves joyously
> Bless your awakening.
>
> Gently the light is spreading over the sea.
> Soon the festivities will fill our desires.
> The calm sea waits. How beautiful upon the sea
> The rays of the day.[144]

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[143] The play began with mercenaries' forecast about the dawn of Pentecost Day and the triumph of a "handful of exiles"; the play ends with the coming of dawn and the death of the hero in combat with a "handful of exiles."

[144] V.S., pp. 133-134. Weil worked on this last poem during her sojourn in London and wanted it to be published together with the lines spoken by Jaffier before he dies. She wished to convey the integrity of the two personae in their love of Venice and the spiritual flow from darkness to illumination.

The curtain falls as the Holy Spirit descends upon Venice.

Spiritual Labor

> The love of beauty of the world, while it is universal, involves as a love secondary and subordinate to itself, the love of all the truly precious things that bad fortune can destroy. The truly precious things are those forming ladders reaching toward the beauty of the world, openings onto it. He who has gone farther, to the very beauty of the world itself, does not love them any the less but much more deeply than before.[145]

The duality of the love of beauty is presented in Venise sauvée through the characterization of the lovers who are destined never to embrace; Violetta and Jaffier touch only in their shared love of Venice. Jaffier is attached to the world, a soldier who is caught up in political events and the potential brutality of exiles. His acts are shaped by the physical beauty of the city and the horror of its devastation.[146] Violetta never quite grasps the circumstances around her, oblivious to the affairs of state and generally non-active. She escapes the pull of gravity entirely, her love remaining pure and focused. Both figures represent alternate "ladders" to transcendent reality, one more elevated than the other.

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[145] "Forms," p. 180.

[146] Burford makes an interesting point about Jaffier's role as a "soldier of God," defending Venice against the idolators (p. 239).

The ambiguity of attachment and human purpose fades in Simone Weil's construction of a theory of spiritual labor. "The spiritual function of physical labor is the contemplation of nature." The human vocation ought to be dedicated to detachment but, Weil adds, few are able to renounce the seductive dreams of homo faber—the builder of the human city. The production of things that will endure, that can be used by many, is compelling. It is the source of both creative affirmation and idolatrous worship, however;the inspiration seems endless and the result as great as that of God's original effort.[147] Faith is transformed from belief in an immortal Supreme Artisan to faith in human transcendence through the construction of artifacts. Frenzied activity overshadows the impulse to contemplate the beauty of the world.

Productive activity expresses both creative and destructive inclinations and the homo faber seemingly has little control over the swing of the pendulum between making and demolishing.[148] Wars undoubtedly arise because the

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[147] H. Arendt's discussion of homo faber resonates this image of the human manufacturer, see Ch. IV, The Human Condition. Arendt emphasizes the objective character of the human artifice. Fabrication, the work of homo faber, consists in reification: "Since his productivity was seen in the image of a Creator-God, so that where God creates ex nihilo, man creates out of a given substance, human productivity was by definition bound to result in a Promethean revolt because it could erect a man-made world only after destroying part of God-created nature" (p. 139).

[148] Ibid., p. 144: "Alone with his image of the future product, homo faber is free to produce, and again facing alone the work of his hands, he is free to destroy."

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human maker cannot tolerate the results of another's energy; competitive jealousy explodes into violent disrespect. The mercenary of Venise sauvée gives voice to this lamentable consequence of human pride in possession and authorship, indicating the injurious side of attachment:

> One is attached to the pssession of a thing because one thinks that if one ceases to possess it it will cease to be. . . . There are a great many people who do not feel with their whole soul that there is all the difference in the world between the total destruction of a city and their own irremediable exile away from that city.[149]

The spiritual value lies hidden from view to the mercenary; deployed to eradicate the beauty of the city they do not know the extent of their work. They are driven by a force that hates beauty—the "we" of an expansive social animal:

> Roman Empire—the social without roots or cities—
> A Roman thinks we; a Hebrew also.
> Spain—for the plotters the conspiracy is social.
> Venice is a city; a city is that which does not evoke the social.
> Rootedness is other than the social.[150]

In Weil's account the city is a "contact with nature, the past, tradition, a metaxu" and Venice is exemplary of this reality.[151] Lying adjacent to the Adriatic Sea with a

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[149] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 365; also Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 112: "To wipe out past centuries by the destruction of a whole city, more horrible still."

[150] V.S., p. 44 (Weil's emphasis).

[151] Ibid., p. 46; the city is "a human milieu where one is no more aware of it than the air one breathes."

horizon that stretches to infinity it is a city that recognizes the mysterious origin of worldly beauty. Contradiction thrives in the meeting of land and water, the fragility of life and the endurance of Venice's traditions; it is root and blossom—an object of "supernatural love."[152]

Spiritual and worldly labor appear in Venise sauvée distinguished by the relationship to beauty and human authority. The first conforms to the law of grace, lifting the worker's gaze to the marvels of supernatural authorship; worldly labor is the work of those impelled by the law of gravity and need. Weil writes that both orientations are revealed in the Genesis text as punishment and co-creation respectively; Plato's Timaeus unites the two in the unfathomable relationship of the Necessary and the Good.[153] One engages in spiritual labor, according to Weil, when the reality of the Supreme Artisan and the suffering Christ are accepted as the sole source of inspiration and purpose. But the idea of divine imitation has not been grasped and many toil without knowledge of true effort. "The false God" is idolized by the worldly worker who seeks

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[152] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 466. Violetta epitomizes the contradiction which "is our path leading toward God"; she is a flower that blooms perennially. "Stars and fruit-trees in blossom. Complete permanency and extreme fragility alike give the feeling of eternity" (Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 466).

[153] "Genesis separates creation and original sin because of the necessities inherent in an account composed in human language. But by being created the creature preferred itself to God. Otherwise would there have been a creation? God created because he was good, but the creature let itself be created because it was evil. It redeems itself by persuading God, by the power of prayer, to destroy it" ("NYNtbk," p. 123).

to dominate and control what God has created for contemplation. The temptation to assume as much power as is possible (Thucydide's principle) blinds homo faber from seeing the sublime reward of transcendent love. The composition of Venise sauvée was certainly directed toward educating the myopic, instructing the audience in the futility of a work that lacks God's purposes; vide and néant are the inevitable consequences of such labor.

Three conclusions for spiritual labor flow from Weil's tragic drama: beauty approximates finality in human life and originates in God's love exclusively; human work ought to be selfless in spirit and preservative in substance; the affliction experienced by the worker is a sharing of Christ's agony and promotes the healing of the terrible imbalances brought about by egoism and imperialism.

Jaffier's affirmation that Venice's beauty is God-created echoes the aesthetic position Weil takes with respect to the artistic work of genius; "decreation" is the key to both requiring that the builder or the painter surrender personal desire and the hope for fame. Anonymity marks the beautiful in all things because it is transpersonal.

> Even in art and science, though second-class work, brilliant or mediocre, is an extension of the self; work of the very highest order, true creation, means self-loss. We do not perceive this truth, because fame confuses and covers with its glory achievements of

> the highest order and the most brilliant productions of the second class, often giving the advantage to the latter.[154]

In renouncing personal ends the existence of beauty is also protected; "No trace of 'I' in preservation; but there is some in destruction. 'I' leaves its mark upon the world by destroying."[155]

Venise sauvée abounds in the play of destructive egoism: Renaud's ambitions and lust for power are matched in kind by the Courtesan's thirst for revenge. Less obvious, but equally injurious, is the form of love Pierre holds for Jaffier; it is a longing for the other that fills his needs. Possessive affection cancels the void of feeling necessary to grace. "One loves the soul when one no longer desires to acquire possession of the loved person."[156] Friendship can be illusory, Weil warns, if it is not received gratuitously "like the joys afforded by art, or life."

> Friendship ought not to cure the sorrows of loneliness but to double its joys. Friendship is not to be sought for, dreamed about,

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[154] "Forms," p. 149.

[155] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 183; Weil writes that she would like to evaporate so that beauty will not be fettered by her presence: "Let me disappear in order that those things which I see may become owing to the fact that they will then no longer be things which I see, things of perfect beauty" (Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 383).

[156] PWNtbk, p. 52. "Not to seize possession of what one loves . . . not to change it in any way . . . refuse power" (ibid., p. 42).

> longed for, but exercised (it is a virtue) . . . . Friendship, like beauty, cannot be detached from reality. Like beauty, it is a miracle. And the miracle consists simply in the fact that it exists.[157]

Preservation of the beauty of the world constitutes the second point in Weil's theory of spiritual labor. We are entreated to look and not eat the splendors that nature lays before our eyes: "The beautiful is that which we can contemplate. A statue, a picture we can gaze at for hours."[158] Violetta's principal activity was that of looking and reporting to the others about the marvels of her city. Jaffier, although commissioned to lead the conspiracy, takes little action except to betray the plot; he is immobilized to do that which his collaborators expect of him because he, too, sees the beauty that Violetta describes. By contrast, Renaud invites the mercenary troops to act without restraint, to consume what they will in the course of their conquest.[159] He is, of course, thoroughly consumed by a ravenous hunger for power. The Council of Ten, for its part, acts to avenge the conspiracy and assure security—it does so through violence and pitiless orders.

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[157] Ibid., pp. 43-44 (Weil's emphasis).

[158] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 81. Weil notes that Greek statues invite us to gaze but not those "in the Luxembourg"; the distinction reveals a distinctive taste in classical form.

[159] "Tomorrow, all day long," Renaud promises his charges, "you will have complete license. You will enter the houses of the bourgeois and the nobles and do there whatever you desire!", V.S., p. 81.

> Human cities, in particular, each one more or less according to its degree of perfection, surround the life of their inhabitants with poetry. They are images and reflections of the city of the world. Actually, the more they have the form of a nation, the more they claim to be countries themselves, the more distorted and soiled they are as images. But to destroy cities, either materially or morally, or to exclude human beings from a city, thrusting them down to the state of social outcasts, this is to sever every bond of poetry and love between human beings and the universe. It is to plunge them forcibly into the horror of ugliness.[160]

The third conclusion is that, "Labor is consent to the order of the universe" requiring obedience even in the face of affliction.[161] Jaffier accepted his destiny once he experienced "reality" and found the thought of Venice's plunder too intolerable. In this manner he acted like the "true painter" Weil describes in her spiritual aesthetic:

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[160]"Forms," pp. 180-181; she reiterates that art teaches us not to touch, adding: "Art (of whatever kind) is related to two things: work and love . . . art is the symbol of the two noblest human efforts: to construct (work), and to refrain from destruction (love overcome)." ("PWNtbk.," p. 42). Freud's discussion of work and love offers an interesting parallel, see Civilization and its Discontents: "The communal life of human beings had . . . a two-fold foundation: the compulsion to work, which was created by external necessity, and the power to love . . ." (Ch. IV).

[161]"LNTBk," p. 358; this view is exemplified in Weil's description of the sea: "The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it. On the contrary, this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea's beauty." ("Love of God," p. 129). Note Weil's wish to imitate the placidity of water in "Her Intellectual Vocation" (WG, p. 85).

> It is a bad painter who looks at the model and says "she has a high forehead and arched eyebrows; so I must put a high forehead and arched eyebrows on the canvas," and so on.
>
> A true painter, through paying attention, becomes what he looks at. And while he is in this state his hand moves, with the brush attached . . .
>
> It is in this way that Christ should be our model.
>
> We must think Christ—Christ himself and not our image of Christ.
>
> Think Christ with one's whole soul—And while one is in this state the intelligence, the will, etc., and the body, performs acts.[162]

Those who throw off the fetters of an "I" and a "we" become like a "blind man's stick," an extension of divine will, acting on behalf of neighbor and the world's beauty. Malheur follows but is mixed with a deepening sense of love; the keener the empathy for the suffering of others, the greater the desire to lift the crushing weight of oppression.

Obedience, Weil asserts, that imitates the Cross is a metaxu which does little to shift the Great Beast's authority. For the human worker toils in the context of force and greed and cannot hope to seize the good for the world; at best the effort reduces a modicum of the evil that demeans and stultifies. Clearly Jaffier's noble deed made a difference to the Venetians but they did not know this and, in the long run, those who did would forget. In

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[162] "LNTbk," pp. 361-362.

that city and all cities the ambitions of hungry soldiers and politicians will prevail; the condition is inherent:

> The great trouble in human life is that looking and eating are two different operations. Only beyond the sky, in the country inhabited by God, are they one and the same operation . . . . "Two winged companions," says an Upanishad, "two birds are on the branch of a tree. One eats the fruit, the other looks at it." These two birds are the two parts of our soul.[163]

Only supernatural love can effect a reconciliation between the parts of the soul. Nothing initiated by human actors will lift the pain and the weariness to a less debilitating level. Only God's descending reach into the soul that has been prepared—empty and waiting—will result in an ascending movement. The technique of preparation is closely related to the three conclusions of spiritual labor. The starting point is to desire the withering of self, to consent to "decreation." Weil reiterates that the Supreme Artisan withdrew in order that humankind could choose freely to imitate this primal act of trusting love.

> It is necessary that all the harmonious textures, without any exception, of which our soul is woven should be undone in order they may be rewoven for us by God with our consent. It is the death which precedes the resurrection. In this way we accept to be and still more we accept not to be, for we realize consentingly that it is God who fashions our being. God has created us without our having wanted it. He has to re-create us with our consent, for he

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[163] "Forms," p. 166.

> does not want to do us the least violence. And then finally, with our consent, he will decreate us.[164]

The appearance of a decreated being is the same as that of a slave—visible but not really seen. Employing a mathematical metaphor Weil writes that: "We are born far below zero. Zero is our maximum . . . . And zero is the state in which one is worthless slave."[165] To consent to such a physical dimunition is "the highest point a creature" can achieve. Another image deepens her meaning, indicating the function of decreation as one which permits the light to fill the soul.

> For glass, there is nothing better than absolute transparency. For a human being, there is nothing more than to be nothingness. Every value in a human being is really a negative value. It is like an opaque stain on glass. If a piece of glass is covered with such blemishes it may easily believe it amounts to something and is much superior to some perfectly transparent glass through which the light passes as if there was nothing there.[166]

The passage of light serves not only to extinguish the pangs of futility experienced by the sufferer but assures the raising of the soul from the pull of gravity. Neither Renaud nor Pierre experienced this infiltration of light

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[164] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 545; in the "NYNtbk," p. 261 Weil insists that self-renunciation requires that we become things, a reference to her factory experience and its incorporation in this context, no doubt.

[165] "LNtbk," p. 354.

[166] Ibid., p. 354.

in their struggle with nothingness and emptiness; they had not accepted another will, they had merely resigned themselves to carnal death. Jaffier's mysterious smile in the minutes before his death indicates that his soul was released from the heavy weight of malheur.

Decreation involves a withdrawal from worldly communication as well; silence—the standard that Weil applies to art—is a sign of obedience to divine will. Creator and Christ represent silence. "There is a sort of divine convention, a pact between God and himself," Weil explains and it "condemns truth . . . to silence."[167] Once again Jaffier's demeanor is dramatically contrasted to that of the facile Renaud—the former engages in long and passionate speech only to express compassion for others, otherwise he is reticent. He says little about the affliction that subsumes his life after he reports the mercenary's plan.[168]

Speech has the effect of nourishing fantasy. Weil's antipathy to the imagination as a "filler of voids" indicted both the spoken and written word that distracted from the real. The novels and dramas which provided the "multi-

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[167] Ibid., p. 341.

[168] "By a providential arrangement, both truth and affliction are mute. By this voicelessness, truth suffers affliction. For only eloquence is happy in this world" (ibid., p. 336). Weil wrote a college essay on the virtues of the sister who never spoke in the story of the "seven swans."

sloped" facets of reality were exceptions to her criticism as was the practice of prayer which was not directed toward any objective. Her recitations and those of her "perfect hero" prompted a greater experience with "real being." Writing of the "Our Father," which she held to be the most complete petition of all prayers, she observed: "It is to prayer what Christ is to humanity. It is impossible to say it once through, giving the fullest possible attention to each word, without a change, infinitesimal perhaps but real, taking place in the soul."[169] Prayer and attention are one and the same when the practitioner has managed to efface the self completely.

The Taoist teaching of the louse and the archer demonstrates the strength of desire and concentration. The destruction of moving locusts requires that the object become larger than life itself—the archer is instructed to maintain an unblinking vigil for many years before a shot is taken.[170] The technique requires an attention that cannot be dissuaded by the irrelevant nor can action proceed before the object of action has attained clarity and balance. Jaffier's pause before action repeats itself in the last act; he is first immobilized as he observes the

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[169]"Concerning the Our Father," WG, pp. 226-226; see Ntbk, Vol. 2, p. 527.

[170]Ntbk, Vol. 1, p. 30; Weil's interpretation of the technique follows: "Let all the aspects of a situation be brought to mind, let the latter ponder them all equally, with an equal attention, equal as the light of the sun;

vulnerability of the sleeping city, this seemingly frozen stance recurs before he joins the group of conspirators who fight an impossible battle and goes to his death. The other actors communicate the kind of activity that marks worldly effort—frenzied and without accomplishment. The image of Tantalus reaching for food and drink is offered by Weil.

> Tantalus—surrounded by food and drink which he can never grasp, for all his desperate straining.
>
> It is the same with men and the good. We are surrounded on all sides and continually solicited by the good, and yet the strongest will and the most violent efforts cannot procure us a tiny part of it.
>
> Make no effort, remain motionless, beseech in silence.
>
> If Tantalus had stayed quite motionless among the fruits and living springs, Zeus would have pity in the end and given him food and drink.
>
> By patience, exhaust God's patience.[171]

Weil adds that Tantalus is the "whole of humanity," too obstinate to surrender to an immobility that would bring God's embrace.

Patience had been the attribute Weil wondered at during her experience in the factory. She observed her co-workers who quietly accepted abuse from the time-keeper and was haunted by the memory of the docile women

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then let a balance be struck; and then let the attention be directed above all towards the chosen aspect, so that the action may be carried out."

[171]"NYNtbk," p. 306.

who stood before the factory door drenched by the rain but reluctant to break the rules. "There is no attitude of greater humility than to wait in silence and patience. It is," according to Weil, "the attitude of the slave who is ready for any order from the master, or for no order."[172] The necessity to earn a wage brought the laborer into line, conforming to every whim the supervisor dictated in fear of a harsh reprimand or, even worse, the loss of the job. The desire to obey divine will and act entirely in accord with the dictstes of a transcendent authority envelops the life of the spiritual worker.

The consent to follow and assimilate the most onerous afflictions has no substantial reward for either the worker in the factory or the same who has chosen grace. The former secures a meager salary and an impatient glance from the boss; the latter fathoms only that material payments have little meaning in the spiritual domain. Jaffier dropped the gold that was given him at the moment when his face turned away from his escorts and toward the horizon. Jaffier's compassion did not relieve him of affliction nor did it save him from death.

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[172]"NYNtbk," p. 101; also "Forms," p. 196, "The slave, who waits near the door so as to open immediately the master knocks, is the best image of it." Christ's silence "under blows and mockery" provides the model ("NTbk," p. 341).

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> A benefit does not wipe out past affliction as such. It adds to the individual experience of dependence formed by affliction—an experience that is already an accomplished fact—a new and different experience of dependence, which presents an opportunity for proficiency in self-knowledge, if the person under an obligation knows how to make use of it.[173]

Malheur cannot be expressed nor can it be thought discursively. "The mind comes slap up against physical suffering, affliction, like a fly against a pane of glass, without being able to make the slightest progress or discover anything new, and yet unable to prevent itself from returning to the attack."[174] Weil adds that this is the method that develops intuition, the authentic mode of knowing. She refers to the tragedian Aeschylus' maxim, "Knowledge through suffering," an authority for her position, concluding that vicarious understanding is never possible. In the same manner that a beautiful line comes to a poet or the solution to a mathematical problem strikes a geometer, the spiritual worker awaits new knowledge because "Active searching is prejudicial."[175] Attention requires that there be no diversions and that the gaze remain fixed even after an instantaneous glimpse of transcendent light for the experience is brief. Even those

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[173] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 366.

[174] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 483.

[175] "Forms," p. 196; this applies to the philosophical method as well which depends upon concerted attention ("LNTbk," p. 335).

who learn how to be immobile and patient lose faith because the miseries of the world persist and supernatural reality seems too distant. "We have to pass through evil, to the extreme limit, in order to reach him again."[176] Such a demand for patient bearing is neither reasonable nor related to worldly affairs:

> God and humanity are like two lovers who have missed their rendezvous. Each is there before the time, but each at a different place, and they wait and wait and wait. He stands motionless, nailed to the spot for the whole of time. She is distraught and impatient. But alas for her if she goes away. For the two places where they are waiting are at the same point in the fourth dimension . . .[177]

In spite of the infinite distance between God and person Weil does not conclude that the spiritual and worldly domains are discontinuous. Transcendent light shines into the places that appear to have the least potential for hope and it is rarely grasped because the heads of the inhabitants are turned from beauty. Weil describes a mythical island populated by the blind. She notes that darkness prevails for the islanders but that the sun continues to rise and set each day. "By it alone the trees and plants reach towards the sky in spite of gravity. By it alone seeds, fruits, all the things we eat, are ripened."[178] Illusion blinds, narrowing the lens so that

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[176]"NYNtbk," p. 246; see also "Forms," p. 211.

[177]Ibid ("NYNtbk"), p. 141.

[178]"Is There a Marxist Doctrine?", O&L, pp. 175-176.

true purpose is blurred; the condition, however, is not irremediable. Full vision can be restored once the false is unveiled for what it is, an atrophied view of human aspiration; the disclosure requires inordinate patience because the distractions are many and the temptation to idolatry great. She cites the mystical wisdom of St. John of the Cross and the passage through "the dark night of the spirit."

> In time the eyes grow accustomed and the sensation of light appears; but then the eyes are raised toward a new and more luminous object and once again are dazzled. This is the alternation which St. John of the Cross notes between the sense of damnation and the sense of salvation.[179]

The assembly room was in Weil's experience the darkest corner in the world where degradation was reckoned along with the piece-rate as an inexorable reality. Paltry promises of increased wages or reduced workload did not convince her that economic or political reforms would suffice; the soul's needs she understood to be larger than the body's. "The factory ought to be a place where, for all the inevitability of physical and spiritual travail, working people can taste joy and nourish themselves on it."[180] Without preparation of the soul the illusory incentive would continue to attract all the attention of the laborer. Renaud's sense of nothing and Pierre's futility would continue to define the mood of the workroom. Perhaps the

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[179]"NYNtbk," p. 243.

[180]"Factory Work," Politics, p. 373.

meanness of the job would drive all to the mercenaries' camp, filled with boredom and a desire to express rage through violence against human life.

Weil proposed a number of concrete reforms to alleviate the immediate conditions of oppression in the factory system. Those ideas will be reviewed in the following chapter. She was particularly concerned with the imposition of malheur upon those who have yet to discover its spiritual value.[181] Her solution lay, in good measure, upon the education of the laborer's soul, dispelling the hardness that had grown through "harsh necessity" and encouraging the sense of dignity and worth. As paradoxical as it may seem she longed to promote in those who felt disempowered a belief that they were entitled to be listened to, cared for and affirmed. Choice for the laborer who yearns solely for the light of reality comes after the whole person—body and soul—has turned away from the hold of gravity. "To each occupation its own spirituality" Weil declared. The rigors of attention and decreation should reflect the particular virtues of the work that is done; the fisherman provides "a beautiful image of patience," the worker in the fields that of strict adherence to nature:[182]

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[181] Weil writes that malheur leads toward an imitation of the Eucharist: "If men could feel continually the fatigues of labour and of life as a reciprocal form of communion . . ." (Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 99).

> It is not the farmer's job to go in search of solar energy or even to make use of it, but to arrange everything in such a way that the plants capable of using it and transmitting it to us will receive it in the best possible condition. And the effort he puts into this work does not come from himself but from the energy supplied to him by food, in other words by this same solar energy contained in plants and in the flesh of animals nourished by plants. In the same way the only effort we can make towards the good is so to dispose our soul that it can receive grace, and it is grace which supplies the energy for this effort . . .[183]

Violetta's lyrical vision of the new day echoes the farmer's patient stance: "The calm sea waits. How beautiful upon the sea the rays of the day." These are Weil's projections of a tranquil world tended by those who work exclusively in the spirit of love.

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[182]"NYNtbk," p. 177.

[183]"Some Thoughts on the Love of God," On S.N.L., p. 151.

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Que le ciel pur sur la face m'envoie . . .

Let the pure sky ahead, this sky of long
and sweeping clouds, send to me
a wind so strong, a wind the scent of joy;
let all be born now, cleansed of dreams.

Human cities will be born for me
blown clean of mist,
the roofs, the cries, the steps, the hundred lights,
the human sounds: what time consumes.

Oceans will be born, the rocking boat,
the oars' dip, the fires of the night,
field will be born, loose sheaves flung;
evenings will be born, star by star.

The lamp will be born and bended knees,
darkness, shock at the face turned away,
hands will be born, metals pounded hard,
iron bitten in the cry of the machines.

The world is born; wind, let it endure!
But phantoms cover it again, the world
that was born for me among the clouds
in a fissure of pale green sky.

—translated by Carol Cosman,
The Other Voice
(Ed. J. Bankier, et al)

CHAPTER IV

THE ENDURING COMMUNITY

> The secret of the human condition is that equilibrium between man and the surrounding forces of nature "which infinitely surpass him" cannot be achieved by inaction; it is only achieved in the action by which man recreates his own life: that is to say, by work.[1]

The Gift of Prometheus

Simone Weil's belief in the impossibility of human life frames her discussion of spirituality and defines her approach to ethics. "All true good," she announces, "carries with it conditions which are contradictory, and as a consequence is impossible."[2] This perspective is derived from Plato's division of the necessary from the good and applies with particular force to her vision of spiritual labor. Every person who undertakes such labor, she argues, must imitate the divine as both creator and mediator but "we are a contradiction, being creatures, being God and other than God." To follow the Supreme Artisan the human worker must withdraw from the world and abandon the self to necessity's rule. On the other hand, the Passion remains an image that must draw the worker in compassionate love

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[1] "PWNtbk," p. 18.

[2] G&G, p. 151.

and solicitude to the world. Reconciliation between the two—immobility and mediation—is not for humankind.

To pursue spiritual labor requires the perseverance of the hero who acts from faith and personal disregard about the body's comforts. This activity is hardly inviting to the modern worker who has made such accomodation to the illusory benefits of routine work that the promises of supernatural reward sound hollow. Weil understood how entrenched the separation between worldly and transcendent goods was and dedicated much of her later writing to the question of reversing values. The reorientation of the human soul emerged as her priority and the training of the soul her redirected pedagogy.

"Impossibility is the door of the supernatural," she declared, and to remain on the wrong side condemns the human worker to a life of meaningless effort and spiritual stupor. But the door serves as an entrance way as well as a barrier and if one persists in knocking the Holy Spirit will eventually respond. Two prisoners, Weil writes in one of her most lucid passages, are separated from one another by a wall which becomes their sole means of communication; as the two tap out their respective messages the barrier is transformed into a metaxu.[3] "An attachment which contains

[3]Ibid., p. 200: "Every separation is a link."

an impossibility is a metaxu."[4] The agonizing isolation of affliction and the necessity to transcend the absolute opposition obtaining between two prisoners (or worker and God) produces a superhuman endurance; as imperceptible as the cry for contact may be, it will be heard.

Metaxu, the metaphorical bridges that cross over the impossible barriers erected by human arrogance, are means, never ends. They express the loving mediation of God as suffering Son and are found in human reality as fixed association and heroic example. Cities of the order of Paris and Venice represent intermediary places, providing for their inhabitants tradition and a sense of belonging. Folk stories, originating among an ancient people, also convey the meaning of metaxu; two tales often cited by Weil are "The Seven Swans" and "The Cobbler and the Princess." The first was the subject of a college essay, focusing upon the faithful obedience of the sister who refused to speak for the sake of her brothers' survival; the latter tale tells of the flight of the worker to his loved one across the forest.[5] Each of the stories underpins Weil's theory of heroic mediation which prescribes a life of attention and unwavering love.

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[4] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 222 (Weil's emphasis).

[5] "NYNtbk," pp. 245-246; Weil writes that "this method of advance" across the tree-tops instructs us that pain cannot be displaced in the effort to go forward to the good.

Jaffier, Weil's tragic hero, dramatized the spiritual significance of mediation and continued the classical tradition of pitting the good against an impossible obstacle which saw human sacrifice as redemptive. Weil seized upon the metaxu as images of mediation and teaching strategies; veritable alternative modes of education. She wrote her essay on "Antigone" for the worker's newspaper in an attempt to divert interest away from immediate rewards and to foster an awareness of the ubiquity of human suffering. If it was possible to enable the hardened laborer to identify with the misfortunes of a truly afflicted figure in tragedy, Weil reasoned, perhaps the gaze would be shifted from the claims of the world. Empathy was the key to her pedagogy of spiritual training.

Weil hoped only to initiate a process. "The most important part of teaching," she wrote from her deathbed, is "to teach what it is to know (in the scientific sense)."[6] Her expectation was that the heroic metaxu would function as stimulants, awakening the capacity to feel through the layers of illusion to the true reality. Antigone represented an evocative figure as did Hippolytus and Prometheus—all suggesting that a leap from the gravitational tug of earth was both possible and irremediably afflicting. For them death was the passage-way or acceptance of a destiny that transformed life into thing-ness.

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[6]"LNtbk.," p. 364 (Weil's emphasis).

> It is only real feelings that possess this power of transferring themselves into inert matter.
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> For living man here below, in this world, sensible matter—that is to say, inert matter and flesh—is like a filter or sieve; it is the universal test of what is real in thought, and this applies to the entire domain of thought without exception. Matter is our infallible judge.[7]

Prometheus exemplifies the convergence of metaxu as model and method. His tragic destiny prefigures that of Christ according to Weil, possessing an excessive capacity for love of humankind and an infinite willingness to sacrifice self for the protection of life. "Christ and Prometheus," Weil writes, "came to scatter a fire upon the earth."[8] Both succumbed to humiliating punishment stretched across creation in an agonizing connection of the two poles, spirit and matter.

Prometheus' sacrifice is described by Weil in the following way:

> Zeus, being angry with men because of their crimes, wished to destroy them. Prometheus interceded on their behalf and was not listened to, so he gave them fire. The fire of divine love, the Holy Spirit. After that, there was no longer any question of their being punished. It was Prometheus who was punished.[9]

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[7] Ibid.

[8] "NYNtbk.," p. 110. Prometheus is variously characterized as: "master of fire; willing—love for mortals—expired . . . friend of God—not to heed—affliction the teacher" (ibid., p. 73).

[9] "LNtbk," p. 341. Weil derived her interpretation of Prometheus from Plato and Aeschylus, ignoring the narrative provided by Hesiod who argued that fire was stolen by the God in an act of treachery and brought with it the curse of womanhood. See Norman O. Brown, "Introduction," Theogony (N.Y., Bobbs-Merrill, 1953).

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The refusal to remain unmoved by the destruction of a people cast the Greek God into a heroic lot which defies a reasoned position with respect to responsibility for others. But Prometheus is pure love, Weil asserts, the "Love" of Plato's Symposium which bears little resemblance to the logic of human knowledge; if is a form of madness and "Madness is metaxu."[10] To abandon all for the preservation of those who look askance at the act of heroism is madness but the "road to Wisdom passes via Prometheus." Suffering precedes knowledge of the real and draws God and mortal together:

> Every contact between God and man is pain on both sides. God cannot look upon evil, and man cannot look upon God. Prometheus and Hippolytus. The torments are complementary. God loving man too much, man loving God too much.[11]

Prometheus, according to Weil, symbolizes both Wisdom through a trial by fire and the fire of enduring love for supernatural reality. She traces the genealogical and etymological origins of the name to "Metis" (Wisdom) and "Poros" (Fire), suggesting the dual character of his gift to mortals.[12] "Fire is the light that destroys," she observes, indicating that the destruction may be taken purely in its spiritual sense wherein it "transforms things into light."[13] Or, fire may be understood only in its physical

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[10] "NYNtbk," p. 257 and p. 328.

[11] Ibid., p. 211.

[12] Ntbk, Vol. 2, p. 518.

[13] "NYtbk," p. w50.

manifestation and applied as the means to build a material world that has no ear for Prometheus' loving message.

> Since man (and every creature) is a mixture of water and fire (contraries: cold and moist—hot and dry . . .) to be engendered out of water and fire implies a dissolution. The blood itself, in mortal anguish, is decomposed into water and fire—then the two are recomposed as blood.
>
> Or rather, this fire is extinguished and there descends from heaven another fire which is inextinguishable.[14]

Fire and water function as opposites in the physical world and a metaxu in Weil's symbolic understanding. In the final moments of her drama she gives to Violetta the lyrical words of welcome to a new day which is signaled by the dawn over the Adriatic Sea. Here the image conveys the impossible relationship of calm water and rising fire that will descend upon Venice and permeate the souls of those prepared for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Elsewhere she writes of the storm at sea as a sign of this heavenly unity —lightning strikes in flashes across the water which receives the fire of transcendence with docile grace. At the end of the storm, fire and water unite in the rainbow, a visible sign of the "pact between God and the world."[15]

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[14]Ibid., p. 111, also p. 207: "The unity of water and fire in the blood is the image of the unity of the Father and the Son in the Spirit."

[15]Ibid., p. 300: "Storm. Lightning strikes at the sea. Then the rainbow appears . . . . Is not the rainbow, a mixture of divine water and fire, the girdle of Aphrodite?"

Prometheus is a rainbow, arching across the horizon for all to wonder at his passion and his obedience; his love has affixed him forever to the two extremes of reality but he asks for nothing to relieve him from this abandoned position. And abandoned he remains. Weil reiterates throughout her critique of modern civilization the loss of spiritual vision and the catastrophic destiny that awaits us if there is no reversal of the course taken by homo faber. Rich and poor, tyrant and victim will be crushed without distinction by the juggernaut unless Prometheus' true gift is finally accepted. If that should happen the metaxu will be there to serve as rungs of a ladder to carry the spiritual workers across the abyss from gravity to grace.

The Heroic Vision

> It is not by chance that doctrines possessing a mystical content are more or less oriented toward death. Cathari. T. E. Lawrence.[16]

The trip to Italy infused Simone Weil with a new zest for art. It seized her with a bewildering ambivalence about the culture of art because she experienced the strange coexistence of a spiritual aesthetics and a violent politics. Wherever she traveled in Italy she could not evade the sights and sounds of fascism and she was distressed that the Italian people shared the Duce's visions of grandeur.

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[16] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 10.

Upon her return to Paris she continued to puzzle over the connection between artistic performance and value and the human identification with charismatic power.

She had not enjoyed d'Annunzio's writing although the Italians acclaimed his works; perhaps his popularity prompted her to take a closer look at the nature of literary taste and the meaning of reputation among those of talent. In her essay on "Literature and Morality" Weil distinguished genius from talent, indicating that the latter possessed an inspired skill in communicating "the actual density of reality." Her critique of those less gifted suggested a weakness for fashion and commercial return. This conclusion was reiterated in her last essay where art and politics are tied together in the context of that which is great.

> The transmission of spurious greatness down the centuries is not peculiar to history. It is a general law, and governs equally well, for exanple, literature and the other arts. There is a certain domination of literary talent over the centuries, which corresponds to the domination of political talent in space; they are forms of domination of a like kind, equally temporal, equally attached to the realm of matter and force, equally base. They can, furthermore, form the subject of sale or exchange in open market.[17]

Literary genius and artist follow a moral and spiritual impulse that diminishes the function of the "I" but the talented worker appeals to the "we" in the hope of establishing and rewarding the self. The mercenary soldier,

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[17] Nd.Rts., pp. 232-233.

exemplified in Weil's tragedy, thinks only of personal gain and causes nothing but destruction in his wake.

"Two new loves" are described by Weil to her friend Posternak, artists who display genius in spite of their very different expression; Goya, the painter and T. E. Lawrence, the soldier are metaxu.[18] The Spanish artist, Weil confides, "arouses an equal degree of horror and admiration" in his startling works on war but the English adventurer captures the essence of the true hero in his autobiographical writing.

> If you want to learn to recognize the prodigious combination which makes an authentic hero—a perfectly lucid thinker, an artist, a scholar, and with all that a kind of saint as well—read his Seven Pillars of Wisdom. . . . Never since the Iliad, so far as I know, has a war been described with such sincerity and such absence of rhetoric, either heroic or hair-raising. In short, I do not know any historical figure in any age who expresses to such a degree what I like to admire. Military heroism is sufficiently rare, lucidity of mind rarer still; the combination of the two is almost unexampled. It is an almost superhuman degree of heroism.[19]

What she found most exceptional in the character of Lawrence was his ability to bring about an equilibrium in his own person between ideal and action. She remarked that the tendency to balance the two among other historical figures generally tipped the scale toward one or the other side—strength and weakness vying for dominance in her value

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[18]"Letter #32," 1938, p. 93.

[19]Ibid.

system.[20] But Lawrence triumphed as a soldier, firm and courageous, without compromising his principles and compassion for the vulnerable: "he was able to describe war as it is seen by a man whose real values are those of peace."[21]

Another attribute that Lawrence possessed as a hero was his complete modesty of style in spite of the assignments he undertook in the Arabian desert. She believed him to be selfless, unpretentious and brutally honest with himself; an actor without claims on glory and fame.[22] "A man of purity," she wrote of him, "accomplishes nothing; or whatever he does accomplish turns to dross."[23] Jaffier, the redeeming hero of her drama, was not accorded a hero's fate either; the nobility of his deed was lost to the citizenry of Venice. Weil identified in her characterization of authentic heroism a motif of separation in act and recognition; courage defines the former and humility (and, possibly, humiliation) underpins the latter.

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[20] Pétrement reviews the content of a letter allegedly sent to the editor of Lawrence's letters on p. 344; she indicates that Weil communicated her own personal struggle in achieving a balanced position.

[21] Ibid., he is compared to St. Francis and Tolstoy.

[22] Ibid., p. 345; Pétrement reports that Weil refused to believe her "hero" had died, arguing that his disappearance was simply another indication of his desire to remain anonymous and "lost in the crowd."

[23] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 484.

Among Weil's friends was one who exemplified her meaning of the heroic personality—Joë Bousquet, a veteran of the First World War, who had been paralyzed by injuries sustained at the front. In a strikingly candid letter to this former soldier, Weil expressed her view about his "privileged" position. "Fortunate are those," she explains, "in whom the affliction which enters their flesh is the same one that afflicts the world itself in their time. They have the opportunity and the function of knowing the truth of the world's affliction and contemplating its reality."[24] She adds that crucifixion was the "extreme expression" of slavery during the Roman Empire, implying that the redemptive function is met in the twentieth century by a bullet.

Each of the three soldiers (Jaffier, Lawrence and Bousquet) enjoy the status of authentic heroism in Weil's understanding. They have demonstrated their willingness to move in the real world, to abandon the consolations of imaginative dreams about worthy activity. Those who attach themselves only to the dreams of childhood cannot rise beyond a spurious greatness. Hitler, Weil concludes, is to be appraised as a wretched dreamer, obsessed with boyhood notions of conquest and personal glory; his eyes saw only the lines of mediocre accounts of Roman victory

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[24]"Letter #44," 1942, p. 137.

when he should have been taught the true greatness of the Greek tragic hero.[25] Perhaps, she muses, modern history would not be so twisted in value and Hitler's career as successful if, indeed, the ideas of illusory greatness were not propagated with such force.

Authentic greatness, unlike the spurious form, transcends the particularity of the person or the event; it embraces all of the "slopes" of reality. Gauss the scientist illustrates Weil's interpretation of the universality and holism of effort: "He would push manuscripts containing the most marvelous discoveries into the backs of drawers and forget them."[26] His forgetfulness, Weil continues, was associated with the humility of genius and the fact that he did not resent the publication of the very same theorems by other scientists years later only adds to the heroic courage of the creative man. He united genius and heroism in his contribution. She writes:

> There exists a focal point of greatness where the genius creating beauty, the genius revealing truth, heroism, and holiness are indistinguishable. Already, as one approaches this point, one can see the different forms of greatness tending to flow into one another.[27]

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[25]See Weil's discussion of Hitler in Nd.Rts., pp. 225-227 and p. 240. She notes that he had read about Sulla and was influenced by "the sort of greatness he saw glorified in this book." The diet of "lies" fed Hitler prepared him for the destiny he seized with the avarice of a starved animal.

[26]Ibid., p. 257.

[27]Ibid., p. 234.

The saint, according to her scheme of greatness, is located on the "focal point," possessing genius and heroic aptitudes in the domain of the spiritual. In a letter to Father Perrin Weil explains that the modern age requires a "new type of sanctity" which will make the vision of universality explicit; this task relies upon the initiative of inspired genius. "More genius is needed," she assures her correspondent, "than was needed by Archimedes to invent mechanics and physics."[28] The performance of spiritual guidance, moreover, demands the commitment and perseverance of the medical doctor sent to a plague-stricken site; the healing of sick souls depends upon brave spirits who will not waiver in the face of death.

Simone Weil did not regard herself as either a genius or a saint but a mere instrument of communication that was "already rotten." Fortunately for the world, she wrote Father Perrin, there are others possessing better thoughts and better suited to serve God. "I am too worn out," she confessed and with characteristic modesty refrained from mentioning why she, at the age of thirty-three, found her strength sapped and her spirit broken.[29] Had she mentioned the activities that carried her across

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[28]"Last Thoughts," WG, p. 99; the new approach would be like a "fresh spring . . . almost equivalent to a new revelation of the universe and of human destiny."

[29]Ibid., p. 100.

hundreds of miles in a decade in the pursuit of reality there would be no question of her heroism.[30] From the classroom she went to the streets on behalf of the unemployed of Le Puy and the exploited of St. Étienne; she educated workers and she protested against the conditions they were obliged to labor in and she continued to lead her classes at the lycée; she composed talks and articles addressed to the radical left covering issues about German politics, French unionization, Soviet socialism; and joined the ranks of laborers in the Parisian factory system and suffered the same fatigue and humiliation they endured throughout life; she ate modestly and lived in simple quarters plagued with insomnia and headaches that reduced her to despair but she continued to produce critical analyses of her social milieu. From 1936 to the day of her death she participated in anti-fascist activities including a short bout at the Spanish front and a longer collaboration with the Resistance.

One fact stands out regarding Weil's confrontations —her obsession with obedience and the discipline of ordered activity. There is good reason for her selection of a military figure to play the part of the perfect hero in Venise sauvée and for her attraction to T. E. Lawrence, the British Colonel of Arabian fame. Referring to the

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[30] See Chapters One and Five for a review of Weil's life.

latter she wrote that an "order releases an inner spring," indicating that the body accepts submission to external authority as a condition for inner grace. A close parallel obtains between her experience as a factory laborer subject to arbitrary orders and the participant of a mystical encounter with Christ; the sublime commands of the latter were freely consented to, however, although both produced in her a terrible affliction and the profound recognition of what it means to carry the Cross.

Her military encounters began with the Spanish Civil War and persisted through the next five years as a matter of compelling obligation. Even though she was completely disheartened by the wanton license exhibited by fascists and Republicans alike, she refused to assume the pacifist position that had marked her earlier political effort.[31] The blood-bath at the front horrified her and she wrote of her

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[31]It is not within the scope of this study to trace the development of Weil's attitudes toward war—they were complicated by her deep commitment to peace and her loathing for the axis. She wrote of May 1939 after the German conquest of Czechoslavakia: "Ever since the day when I decided, after a very painful inner struggle, that in spite of my pacifist inclinations it had become an overriding obligation in my eyes to work for Hitler's destruction . . . my resolve has not altered" (Letter #48, 1942, p. 158); see Thomas Merton, "Pacifism and Resistance in Simone Weil," in Faith and Violence, Notre Dame, Univ. of N.D., 1968, pp. 76-84.

bitter realization to the novelist Bernanos: "One sets out as a volunteer, with the idea of sacrifice, and finds oneself in a war which resembles a war of mercenaries, only with much more cruelty and with less human respect for the enemy."[32] This experience with unbridled violence ironically became the basis for her later writing on the Great Beast and the necessity for the hero to function as a counterweight to this evil.

Three plans were drafted by Simone Weil in as many years reflecting the motif of heroic opposition: a response to German terror in Prague, a plan for emergency medical and emotional care in battle, and a plan for espionage in France. Each of these proposals would have her participate in the military operation—in the center of affliction—and would utilize some aspect of her theory of spiritual labor. The first plan was rapidly dismissed by the authorities as impossible. Pétrement describes its objective:

> She had been shocked to learn that a revolt of students in Prague had been brutally repressed by the Germans. She worked out a project for parachuting troops and arms into Czechoslavakia. She thought that they could get the people to rise up against the Germans and help those in prison. She presented her plan to a number of important political figures, always adding that, if it were adopted, she absolutely insisted on participating in the action.[33]

The failure of this venture did not deter Weil from composing a more ambitious plan which would establish a corps of

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[32]"Letter #35," 1938, p. 109.

[33]Pétrement, p. 355.

first-aid technicians to administer life-survival services to the French and allied troops on the battlefield. Her optimism about this proposal was considerable and she circulated it with the confidence that it would be implemented and that she would be placed at the front.[34] Her scheme was called "Tacitus" indicating the symbolic character of the experiment; the ancient historian of the name wrote of young women deployed by the Germans to the site of conflict alongside the elite guard.[35] Weil's interpretation of this custom focused upon the moral implications of women "paramedicals" representing in their persons and their actions a counterbalance to Hitler's brutality. Women convey "maternal solicitude," she explained, and the image of the homeland that would uplift the morale of the stricken troops: "This corps of women could be such a concrete and inspiring evocation of far distant homes." In effect, the presence of these courageous women would show the world that there was another way, an inspired way, which opposed the S.S. mentality and the idolatrous force of the Germans.[36]

The women of her "front-line nursing" squad would

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[34]See addenda to "Letter #45," pp. 145-63 for the complete text of the plan that was sent to: Admiral Leahy, J. Maritain, and President Roosevelt as well as her friends Bousquet and Schumann.

[35]"Plan," p. 152.

[36]Ibid; ideals must be tested Weil wrote: "An inspiration is only active when it is expressed, and not in words but in deeds" (p. 150).

serve as veritable metaxu in combat, a buffer between the violence and an assurance of loving care for those war-weary and injured troops they served. The traditional nurturing role of the woman would be put to the test of redemptive action.[37] In anticipation of criticisms against the corps Weil wrote that there "was no reason to regard the life of a woman, especially if she has passed her first youth without marrying or having children, as more valuable than a man's life." Moreover, the assumption of woman's frailty in the face of combat was dismissed by Weil with reference to both the heroism of St. Joan of Arc and the assurance that only the most qualified, in stamina and moral determination, would be selected for action.

During the period when the plan was being considered by the War Ministry Weil was obliged to leave France with her parents, a decision she deeply regretted from the moment of her departure. Immediately upon arriving in New York she began a drive to reverse the decision, writing to her friend and former classmate Schumann in the hopes that he might use his influence as a member of the Free French staff to return her to the Continent.[38] "I

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[37] From the feminist perspective (which Weil did not have) there is a curious twisting of the traditional role to serve egalitarian purposes. The sexual issue concerned her only as a matter of possible abuse and she assured her readers that the squad would not mix with the soldiers except during battle.

[38] "Letter #45," 1942, pp. 144-145.

have the feeling," she confided, "that by leaving France I have committed an act of desertion," and begged that he find her a position in the Movement. Life and death, from her perspective, were shaped by her proximity to risk rather than to safety; she believed she would perish if not engaged in the war effort.

> The suffering all over the world obsesses and overwhelms me to the point of annihilating my faculties and the only way I can revive them and release myself from the obsession is by getting myself a large share of danger and hardship. That is a necessary condition before I can exert my capacity for work . . . save me from being wasted by sterile chagrin. In my present situation I cannot live. It very nearly makes me despair.[39]

Even after Schumann arranged to bring her to London and locate her in the "provisional work" she agreed to undertake as a first step to her mission to France, Weil remained agitated about her pursuit of "danger and hardship." She wrote again to Schumann, expressing her sense of duty: "Although the thoughts which my pen transcribes are far above me . . . I think that I have been commanded by God to prove experimentally that they are not incompatible with an extreme form of action in war."[40] She explained that conscious disobedience to divine will would be more devastating than hell; she would lose "all dignity and discretion in [her] ceasless desperate appeals."

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[39]"Letter #47," 1942, p. 156.

[40]"Letter #53," 1943(?), p. 171.

In assessing the skills and abilities she might contribute to the liaison effort, Weil listed her chief attributes as those of low esteem and poor health—curious as that may seem. She reasoned that her loss would be less injurious to the Resistance and that her self-abnegating manner would insure the protection of secrets if she was captured by the enemy. Arguing that the brutal sadism of her inquisitors would be futile because she had trained herself to be a perfect "scapegoat" and proven her method while in Marseilles, she urged Schumann to represent her interests to the staff.[41] The method was designed to confuse her tormenters: "I made up my mind that if ever I was involved in an operation I would always carry in my head an innocuous list of false avowals, carefully prepared in advance, so that they could be extorted from me during the process of breaking down my self-respect."[42]

No matter how impassioned her tone and reasoned her appeal she failed to convince the Free French staff of the advantages of sending her to France.[43] She warned Schumann

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[41]Ibid., p. 174; As a consequence of her activities distributing a banned journal, the police arrested and questioned her for several hours before releasing her. She surrendered her dignity during the interrogation but succeeded in dissuading them from further action "by looking them steadily in the eye the whole morning . . ."

[42]Ibid., p. 173.

[43]Petrement, pp. 514-516 reviews some of the reasons why the staff rejected her plan; Weil's focus upon how she would not betray secrets was, in large measure, a reaction to their worry about her capture and ability to endure torture.

that such a failure would doom her to terrible affliction and the loss of what small reserve of health she then had; her warning eventually proved to be prophetic. Her words express the significance of metaxu for her personal life in the passage taken from her final plea:

> I feel an ever increasing sense of devastation, both in my intellect and in the centre of my heart, at my inability to think with truth at the same time about the affliction of men, the perfection of God, and the link between the two . . . Like a beggar, I have no argument except to cry my needs . . . affliction means first of all necessity. It is only suffered by accident or by obligation. And an obligation is nothing without an occasion for fulfilling it. It was to find such an occasion that I came to London. I calculated badly . . . . It is too easy to face the extremest dangers on paper, when there is no reason to suppose that anything real will come of it. Nothing is more contemptible. How can I help despising myself?[44]

Although a spark of hope continued to nourish Weil after the Czechoslavakian and nursing schemes were summarily dismissed, she grew more pained by the thought that she would not return to France. She had not been dissuaded by judgments about the "impracticality" and "impossibility" of her proposals, nor had she lost her confidence in herself as a sacrificial intermediary in the effort to liberate her native land but this restraint upon her heroic self-

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[44]"Letter #53," pp. 178-9; the letter is undated but was probably written in January 1943 just three months before her complete physical breakdown.

image was lethal; from early Winter until her collapse in April she fretted over her disobedience to a higher authority than the Free French.[45]

For more than a decade the afflicted state of peasants, industrial laborers and victims of totalitarian governments had absorbed her energy; each of these engagements were freely chosen without restrictions upon her movement; neither protocol nor regulation had barred her way through the factory gate or across the Spanish border. Life in London was different. She lived there an exile from her country, failing to convince her friends and her colleagues of the seriousness of her purpose in returning to the culture and landscape of her roots. Her affliction increased as the months passed and no promise was in sight that her wish would be fulfilled. The exile's pain was not entirely new, she had known the detachment from home when she fled with her family first from Paris and then to New York; she had identified with the dejection of the Annamites (Vienamese) whom she came to know in Marseilles and shared their singular desire to be repatriated.[46]

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[45]Ibid., pp. 176-177: "All I wish for myself is to be one of those who are ordained to see themselves as unworthy slaves, having done no more than they were commanded. What fills me with anguish is the fear that, on the contrary, I am one of the disobedient."

[46]See "Letter #36," pp. 110-111 to the playwright Jean Girandoux who was the Minister of Propaganda in 1939-1940. Weil chides him for his insensitivity to the colonial situation and France's role in oppression. "We have killed their culture," she laments and adds that "it is dreadful

After befriending certain of these colonial prisoners she sent a letter to Admiral Leahy, then the American ambassador to Vichy, urging him to take up their cause.[47] She recommended that "America . . . refuse to give any help till these civil treatments have really ceased," avowing that she "would most gladly starve" if that would promote the lot of the foreign internees.

Food became the central symbol of life lived as metaxu in Weil's final years—a means of fueling the allied cause and a sacramental self-offering for those captive to war conditions. Echoing her willingness to sacrifice adequate nourishment, she wrote to Schumann, "I cannot eat the bread of the English without taking part in their war effort" and, indeed, she acted upon her words. From the time of her departure from Marseilles to the date of her death a little more than a year later she restricted her diet to what she imagined her compatriots in France were able to secure for their tables. Through this austere regimen—which ultimately killed her—she remained connected to the afflicted of her native soil; her rationale, perhaps, one of the futility of the well-fed body during a period of spiritual famine.

The issue of food is significant in the correspondence to her family in New York, once again suggesting the

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to feel guilty through involuntary complicity." While in New York she dispelled the depressing truth of her exile by plotting her return to the Continent.

[47]"Letter #42," 1941, pp. 132-33; see Pétrement's account, pp. 397-399.

linking role she assumed between herself and those whom she loved. These final letters from London abound in signs of the heroic posture Weil took with respect to the protection of her parents from worry. She constantly assured them that she was well and reasonably happy even when her health was rapidly failing and she had been hospitalized.[48] Nourishing their ignorance about the condition of her body and morale allowed Weil to shelter her parents from impotent worry and direct her communication away from talk about herself. Ironically she succeeded in this effort, the only success she met during her wartime attempts to participate in the action. On the one hand, she deviated from the truth, a conscious decision to concoct a false impression of herself which resonated the method she had planned to implement behind the enemy lines had she been captured. On the other, her secret illness immobilized her, confining her to a bed in suffering silence, while her parents responded without knowing that their daughter would soon be dead. Her heroism reflects that of the tragic figures she had long admired.

Representing herself as gay and untroubled she wrote to her parents soon after her hospitalization; the letter jokes about the food of her thoughts:

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[48]Petrement reports that she kept the truth from her parents by securing her friends' promise that they would not reveal her situation and hiding the fact of her hospitalization by addressing her envelopes as if she were residing at home. She struggled to keep her handwriting steady so as not to dismay them, "an extraordinary act of will" in Petrement's view (p. 521).

> What a lot of letters the Atlantic sharks must be eating! I wonder if they find ours digestible? I hope they get nourishment from them for their aesthetic faculties, etc., and learn to appreciate the submarine landscapes much better.[49]

Her next letter is less jovial about the subject of nutrition, unmistakenly an evasion of the parental inquiry about her diet. She tells of her alarm about consumer practices and conveys something of the concern that is associated with "natural food advocacy" decades after her death.[50] "People have developed a taste for adulterations, especially chemical mixtures. This is particularly noticeable," she continues, "with drinks but also with food." In still another letter the language of food dominates:

> Mixtures are known as "fruit fool," they consist of a compote of fruit, strained and mixed with a lot of (chemical) custard or gelatine or suchlike. The name is delightful!
>
> But these fools are not like the ones in Shakespeare. They are liars, in pretending tp be fruit, whereas in Sh. the fools are the only people who tell the truth.[51]

The unheard and ignored fool that Weil contrasts with the deceptive dessert secures truth "at the price of nameless degradation.

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[49] "Letter #59," May 22, 1943, p. 186.

[50] "Letter #60," June 9, 1943; reviewing her eating habits and the places she alleges to dine at, she states: "You won't be complaining, today, that I say nothing about food." See "Letter #62," p. 191 which reports that she is eating with regularity and that all her needs are taken care of; "I don't lack for anything," of course is a true representation of her status as a patient.

[51] "Letter #68," August 4, 1943, p. 200 (Weil's emphasis).

Weil identified with the fools of Shakespeare, set apart as she was from the mainstream of war activity and feeling inept; she asks her mother "do you feel the affinity, the essential analogy between these fools and me—in spite of the École and the examination successes and the eulogies of my 'intelligence'?"[52] Keeping the depth of her despair well concealed from her parents, she did allude to her disappointment with her colleagues and her feelings of frustration about her efforts. Referring to the "two Mary's" (of gold and tar) of the folktale, she expresses to her mother her identification with the golden door and her worry that no one is present to receive its riches.[53] Sensitive to the "hurried attention" bestowed on her writing, she writes her friend Louis Closon of her decision to resign from the Free French movement only a month before her death. The letter bespeaks her profound estrangement from the staff of the Movement and the hurt and bewilderment she felt in her relationship with one colleague in particular:

> His often repeated statement: "get it off your chest" (which seems to imply: after that, you'll be available for serious matters) and his

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[52]Ibid., pp. 200-201; she refers to the fool's sad eyes in Velasquez' painting to illustrate her point.

[53]"Letter #66," July 18, 1943; there is no conceit in this testimony because Weil always understood herself to be a vehicle of God's will; she merely was chosen to pass along the "deposit" and not to take satisfaction in her knowledge or flaunt it among her contemporaries.

> question: "Why doesn't she tackle something concrete, such as trade union problems, instead of wallowing in generalities?" don't seem to indicate very great interest . . . Intellects that can be utilized abound on the market . . . I myself cannot utilize my own intelligence; so how could I put it at Phillipe's disposal? It is my own intelligence that utilizes me, and it obeys without reserve . . .[54]

The loneliness of being misunderstood served to exacerbate her frail condition; confiding to Closon "I am finished, broken, beyond possibility of mending" she indicated her knowledge of the seriousness of her condition. She explained that only her parents could mend her but they were across the ocean and her decline irreversible. Pétrement suggests that her final letter recognizes this truth and is intended to prepare her parents for the "absence of news" and the eventual announcement of her death.[55] Weil gently tells them that little time remains but that they should be consoled bu a telegram that will assure them that they may proceed to Algiers.[56] The note abruptly concludes "nothing is certain!"

The final months of Weil's life attest to the heroism of filial attachment and the final years to a heroic vision of spiritual labor interpreted as the reduction of wartime suffering. Weil's determination to realize

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[54]See Pétrement, pp. 529-31 for complete text of letter dated July 26, 1943.

[55]Ibid., p. 535.

[56]Weil had been attempting to arrange passage for her parents to Algiers through the Free French staff in the hopes that they would be reunited there; that plan, too, failed.

the consequences of her words was based upon her notion of obligation and her belief that the human body is the "indispensable intermediary through which the soul brings real action to bear upon itself."[57] The plan she named "Tacitus" would have placed her among a small band of disciplined women on the battlefield; their task "would mitigate by their presence and their words the agony of waiting, sometimes so long and so painfully, for the arrival of the stretcher-bearers."[58] Clearly, had Weil succeeded in convincing the Free French staff of her potential for espionage and had she been captured, there is little doubt that she would have implemented her scheme as metaxu, accepting the tortures and refusing to betray her people. Patient acceptance of suffering, whatever the circumstances, was the key to appropriate heroism, always focused on the "suitability and necessity of the action" rather than its results.

"Reality," Weil insisted, "has need of our adherence" which calls upon each of us to move toward the afflicted. In her experience the expression of adherence was varied but constant, involving the distribution of her teacher's salary to the poor and unemployed, the physical commitment to

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[57]"NYNtbk.," p. 288; p. 290: "Obligations imply action, and the body is the appropriate arbiter of the soul's conflict about action."

[58]"Plan," 70 Letters, p. 148; writing to her mother that she was "absolutely at home" and held "a tender love for this bomb-damaged town" she offered a glimpse of her desire to be one with the world's affliction.

protesters by being one of them in LePuy and St. Étienne, and the giving of her knowledge to young and old wherever she found a need. She instructed a youthful farm worker and her London landlady's son with as much intensity as she taught the students at the lycée or in the workers' schools. Her reward was simply articulated: "there are treasures of divine mercy for those who abandon everything, including their honour, and pray only for the grace of not doing any harm."[59]

In the Shadow of the Great Beast

> The Great Beast is the only object of idolatry, the only ersatz form of God, the only imitation of an object which is infinitely distant from me and is yet me.[60]

In an effort to bridge the distance between herself and her family Simone Weil wrote frequently in her Spring letters of the fruit blossoms that brought color and fragrance to the lives of New Yorkers and Londoners. The blossom represented the universal beauty God gave to creation and the fragility of human life. At the same time that she wrote of nature's rebirth she was completing the manuscript concerned with the rebirth of her native land, The Need for Roots. In this long text which had been assigned to her Weil diagnosed the social ills of France and proposed a cure more radical than anything the Free French

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[59] "Letter #53," p. 174.

[60] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 618.

staff was prepared to recognize or implement.[61]

"Uprootedness is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed," she warned because "it is a self-propogating one."[62] The disease produces spiritual lethargy and physical violence among the people, destroying any vestige of moral civilization and breeding idolatry. It originates in the conquest of one people by another who have lost their way: the Romans, "a handful of fugitives" conquered the Mediterranean; the Hebrews "were escaped slaves" who took Palestine and the modern Germans, "a nation of proletarians, uprooted individuals."[63] All of the uprooted bands share, according to Weil, a reversal of ends—worshiping in pride the nation-state in place of accepting the love of transcendence in humble obedience.

> Love of one's country is pure so long as it is love for what is, not for what might be in the future; so long as it is a man's love for the harmony which knits together the collective body of citizens, and not a participation in the love of the Great Beast for itself.[64]

Uprooting brings about a confusion in loyalties which, in the modern age, produces an attachment to one or another ideological positions. Weil sees little difference among those positions: "Fascism, Communism and anarchy being

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[61] The medical imagery is explicit in Weil's writing and resonates Plato's language in The Republic; note Nd.Rt., p. 183: "The essential thing is to have rightly diagnosed the case, conceived a cure, chosen the right medicaments, and made sure the patient is supplied with them . . ."

[62] Ibid, p. 47

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 618.

all scarcely different, almost equivalent" represent "expressions of the self-same evil."[65] These political orientations promote a view of time that only serves to destroy rootedness—an imaginary future is projected which furthers the "loss of the past." There is no greater tragedy for humankind than such a loss because it condemns all to "oblivion."[66]

> What we have forgotten of the past—for example, an emotion—has absolutely no existence. And yet everything of our past that we have forgotten retains none the less its full reality—but is not existence, because the past does not exist today.[67]

Contributing to the obliteration of the past is the professional historian who relies upon documentary accounts; Weil's bitterness is unrestrained:

> What is called the historical spirit doesn't pierce through the paper to discover real flesh and blood; it consists in a subordination of the mind to documents.
>
> Now, according to the nature of things, documents originate among the powerful ones, the conquerors. History, therefore, is nothing but a compilation of the depositions made by assassins with respect to their victims and themselves.[68]

In spite of the overwhelming deficiencies of history, Weil insists that the past be used as a source of inspiration,

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[65] Nd.Rts., p. 182.

[66] Ibid., p. 51, and p. 119.

[67] "God in Plato," in On S.N.L., p. 122.

[68] Nd. Rts., pp. 224-225.

that it is always more reliable than the projections of the future or the assessments of the present. In this context she is especially critical of the role that "progress" as an ideological motif has played in the western mind for several centuries. She asserts that progress depends upon an erroneous science and a distortion of philosophy, citing Plato's teaching in her defense: "the imperfect cannot give rise to the perfect or the less good to the better."[69] The idea of a civilization without flaw is pure fantasy, in Weil's thought, but the retrieval of the voices from a hidden past will promote a healthier culture: "It is this water from the well of the Past that keeps the tree of the world always green."[70]

Rediscovery of the "courage born of despair" took Weil to the text of a medieval epic poem about Languedoc; in the poetry of a culture long vanquished she confirmed the truth that military might transforms spiritual value.[71] Before the invading Crusaders came to Toulouse and its environs the citizens of Languedoc lived in harmony and with an "intense civic feeling" based upon the ideals of

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[69]"Romanesque Renaissance," SE, p. 44.

[70]"NYNtbk.," p. 302.

[71]"Medieval Epic Poem," SE, p. 37: "Contrary to a widely held prejudice, a purely military decision can influence habits of thought for long centuries and over vast areas. So mighty is the empire of force." (The poem is the Song of the Crusade against the Albigensians, composed in the language of "oc"—hence "langue d'oc").

chivalry. Loyalty commanded their respect and obedience for authority and bound them together in a community that knew nothing of religious intolerance. The troops of de Montfort destroyed the peace and murdered the citizens with impunity, changing the function of legitimate authority for all time.[72]

> The Languedoc. There is nothing to compare with a native civilization (patrie) that is dead and cannot possibly be revived (there is no Great Beast to cope with) . . .[73]
>
> The feudal bond, by turning obedience into something between man and man, greatly reduces the part played by the Great Beast . . .
>
> We ought only to show obedience either to the Law or to a man. This is very nearly the case in the monastic orders. The social City ought to be built on this model. (The Languedocian civilization.)[74]

The people of Languedoc shared with the ancient Greeks a distaste for excessive feeling and the use of force; both shared a love of pure feeling and the notion of mediation. But Rome destroyed its neighbor Greece and her "vocation as builder of bridges"; similarly Languedoc was obliterated and all traces of the authentic Christian vocation (among the Cathari) with it:

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[72] See Weil's noted on legitimate authority in Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 553 and p. 555. Rooted society is characterized by "continuity in Time, permanence and unchangeableness," which Languedoc had been before the Crusades; uprooted society "arouses the obsessing idea of progress and a thirst for getting rich and public advancement."

[73] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 446.

[74] Ibid., p. 467.

> Christian civilization is the Romanesque civilization, which disappeared prematurely by assassination. It is infinitely painful to think that it was the Church who handled the weapons of this murder. But what is painful is sometimes true. It may be that in those early years of the thirteenth century Christianity was faced with a choice. She made an evil choice. She chose evil, and the evil bore fruit and now we are suffering evil. Repentance means going back to the moment which preceded the wrong choice.[75]

And Simone Weil did precisely this; during her sojourn in Southern France she studied the culture of the Cathari and attempted to grasp the life that had been theirs many centuries before her city, Paris, had fallen to modern "crusaders." The inspiration she took from her studies gave her hope that the Great Beast would not succeed without a fierce resistance: "The spirit of the civilization of the langue d'oc in the twelfth century corresponds . . . to aspirations which have never died and which we must not allow to die, even though we cannot hope to fulfill them."[76] If the aspirations were to give way to the Great Beast she warned there would be nothing but life in a "quasi-hell," populated by "quasi-damned souls."[77]

Rooted Associations

> To sum up, the abolition of the proletarian lot, chiefly characterized by uprootedness,

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[75] "Romanesque Ren.," p. 48; " . . . a shady deal in salvation and the acquisitiveness of a rather mediocre man were all that was required to destroy a world" ("Medieval Epic Poem," p. 43).

[76] Ibid.

> depends upon the creation of forms of industrial production and culture of mind in which workmen can be, and made to feel themselves to be, at home.[78]

No single theme in Weil's political thought is more persistent than her antipathy to revolution as a means for the amelioration of harsh working conditions. Marxism and the promises tendered by its adherents had prompted her to investigate the real conditions of work in the French factory system and search for an answer to the question of the viability of "proletarian consciousness." Her discoveries then and her analysis thereafter focused upon the impossibility of transforming a consciousness habituated to slavery to one of freedom and leadership through the shift in property relations alone.[79] Moreover the Soviet example suggested that "passive obedience" was tenacious and that the transfer of political power did nothing to lessen the routine inequities confronting the laborer on the job.[80]

Weil's critique of revolution grew from her love of truth and her fear of what illusion does to a people; she saw the practitioners of ideological politics as representatives of the Great Beast, fostering hope in reveries and disregarding the substance of reality. This theme pervaded all of

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[77] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 252; quasi-hell places the citizen in the position of a "man stripped and wounded by thieves." The "clothing of character" has been taken, leaving the victim exposed and vulnerable.

[78] Nd. Rts., pp. 72-73.

[79] See Ch. 2 for a review of this position.

[80] "Letter #13," 1936, p. 40; in an extraordinary correspondence Weil conducted with a factory manager during

her writing—her literary criticism which located the weakness of talent in the taste for popularity and fame, her literary creation (Venise sauvée) which identified the dreams of power with the band of mercenaries who knew nothing of the true beauty and civic love. Collective ambition, even for good intentions such as social justice, invariably becomes a dangerous expression and, she allowed, the most deceptive of all movements is that which would result in a "workers' imperialism."

> In so far as a revolt is based upon the revolutionary idea of social justice it is good and healthy. In so far as the revolt is against the affliction essential to the very condition of the laborers it is a lie. For no revolution is able to abolish this affliction. But this lie has the greater appeal because the affliction is felt more vividly, profoundly and painfully than injustice itself. Moreover, it is ordinarily confused. The notion applied by Marx to religion, that it is the opium of the people, has betrayed itself and is more fittingly applied to revolution. The hope of revolution is always stupefying.
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> At the same time, revolution satisfied the need for adventure, that which is most opposed to necessity yet a reaction to the very same affliction. The taste for detective novels and films and the tendency for adolescent criminality corresponds as well to this need.[81]

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her tenure at the lycée in Bourges she made great effort in raising his consciousness about ideology and the proletarian condition. She affirms her disengagement from Communist goals but adds: " . . . every significant political group nowadays tends equally towards accentuating oppression and getting all the instruments of power into the hands of the State . . ."

[81] "Condition première d'un travail non servile," C.O., 1941, p. 263.

Far more intricate in its development is Weil's attitude toward political and economic reform. In her earliest expression of support for non-ideological change she indicated her belief in rational balance and this position remained fundamentally unchanged through the complex political trials of the 'thirties.' What emerged as a key to her approach and underwent a complete turn-about was her attitude toward unionism as a viable force. Before her factory experience she was highly sympathetic to the cause of the syndicalists and, accordingly, their commitment to union organization and control. However during her involvement in labor she became uneasy with trade unionism, sensing that it suffered from the same bureaucratic frailties as management. This position changed twice more—during the massive strikes of 1936 and after 1938.[82]

The union movement, whatever Weil's position, served to develop her theory of metaxu as a concrete social reality; she perceived the trade union as a bridge across the labor-management impasse and hoped to tap its scope and authority to forge industrial harmony and an extensive program of worker reforms. Critical to this approach was the success of the Popular Front government in May 1936 and the unprecedented industrial strikes that followed soon after.[83] Weil was exuberant with the form of the strike

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[82]See Petrement, pp. 285-86, pp. 234-35.

[83]Ibid., p. 264.

and the spirit it inculcated among the laborers.[84] She hastened from Bourges to Paris to join the strikers and see exactly how they were conducting themselves; in extraordinary confidence she reunited with the workmates she had known at Renault and celebrated their "smiles and words of warm solidarity."

The joyous mood of the strikers assured Weil that the rebellion was a decisive victory for their hearts, if not their pocketbooks; she believed that this united show of strength expressed a psychological liberation from the reign of terror that had been their routine. Jealousy, fear, obsession for pay and speed to assure a livable wage seemed to be the attributes of a hated past while the immediate present transformed the factory into the physical site of community. "What a joy," she declared, "to hear the sounds of song, music and laughter instead of the incessant machine—the striking symbol of the harsh necessity that breaks the workers' bodies."[85]

She was not lacking in anxiety, however, about the consequences of the strike and the substantive changes that would be negotiated in the days to come. Having dismissed the provocations of the Communists and the attempts of the union organizers as determinative of the strike, she argued

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[84]"A new form of strike had been discovered: the sit-in strike, the takeover of the factory. The workers camped at their places of work" (ibid).

[85]"La vie et la grève des ouvrières métallos," June 10, 1936, in CO, p. 169.

that a settlement must reflect the moral impetus that brought about the sit-in and work stoppage. Before the resumption of production a method for infusing the moral aspirations as well as the material interests of both sides must be found.[86]

> There was a certain order in the factory before June, a certain discipline which was based upon slavery. In large measure slavery has disappeared and simultaneously the order based upon slavery . . . . The question of a new order is posed, an order congenial to the newly acquired liberties of the worker, the retrieval of dignity and the sentiment of camaraderie . . .[87]

Weil's anxieties were well founded; on her second visit to the Renault plant in the early summer she discovered that the mood had radically shifted to one of distrust, ignorance and silence. In a letter to Detoeuf she conveys her alarm at this turn of events and suggests a "utopian" alternative to the confused atmosphere:

> If the working class imposes its power with such crude force it must assume the corresponding responsibilities. It is inadmissible and

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[86]See "Letter #22," to "B," June 1936, pp. 53-54. "I am not thinking now of their material interests . . . but of their moral interests, the good of their souls. I think it is good for the oppressed to have been able to assert their existence for a few days and lift their heads and impose their will and obtain some advantages which they do not owe to condescending generosity. And I think it is equally good for the bosses—for the good of their souls—to have been obliged . . . to give way to force and endure a humiliation."

[87]"Remarques sur les enseignements à tirer des conflicts du nord," 1936-37(?), OO, p. 204. This report was prepared for the C.G.T. about conditions in Northern France.

> in the last resort impossible that one irresponsible social category should impose its wishes by force and that the employers, who bear the whole responsibility, should be obliged to yield. There must be either a certain joint responsibility or else a ruthless re-establishment of hierarchy, which would no doubt involve bloodshed no matter how it was effected.[88]

The "durable transformation in the relationship of forces" that Weil hoped would emerge was far off and the most important task, she had come to believe, was to restore stability as "une necéssite vitale."

Labor, obviously, sought to institutionalize its small triumphs and management to recoup its former power; the impasse grew as the weeks passed with labor becoming restless at the thought of disciplinary action. Weil's solution was not a compromise between the two parties but the identification of the General Confederation of Labor (the C.G.T.) as an agency to restore equilibrium. She had no illusion about the Confederation's impartiality nor did she feel this would be inappropriate since management, in terms of the real exercise of power, had the upper hand. Describing a conversation she overheard between two representatives of business about the state of affairs, Weil explains to Detoeuf that the obstinancy of management might produce irremediable division: "The employers, because they <u>think</u> they have no more to lose, are adopting a revolutionary attitude; and the workers, because they <u>think</u> they have something quite important to lose, are adopting a conservative

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[88]"Letter #24," 1936, pp. 59-60.

language and attitude."[89]

At first the C.G.T. seemed to be the answer to Weil's fears about industrial warfare—a veritable metaxu between the interests of labor and business which she hoped would assume responsibility for the appeasement of conflict.[90] Imperative to this plan was the creation of study groups by the Confederation to specify the details of the "new order" which she projected as a balanced and collaborative arrangement. In addition to the delineation of work procedures she held the union responsible for improving the health and safety of labor and creating standards for the equitable hiring, transfer and discharge of laborers.[91]

Less than one year after placing her faith in the C.G.T. as an agency for balanced order Weil became discouraged with the internal politics and the external policies of that organization.[92] She wrote Jean Posternak "the spirit

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[89]"Letter #25," 1937, pp. 61-64 (Weil's emphasis). She fears that shut-outs by the employer will heighten the anger of the workers and drive them to violence—a consequence she sought to forestall if at all possible.

[90]Balance represented the singular virtue of the social order in Weil's theory of politics: "A well-ordered society would be one in which the State only exercised a negative action, after the style of a rudder, giving a slight pressure at the right moment to compensate the first sign of any loss of balance" (Ntbk., Vol.2, p. 559). The C.G.T. was to keep the balance of forces; she had compared such a balance to the cube, multiple in its sides but harmonious as a totality. "Balance alone is able to destroy force, to abolish it" (Ntbk., Vol. 2, -. 485).

[91]"Remarques," p. 205.

[92]See Pétrement's review of the events, pp. 323-324 which included the growing bureaucratization of the

of June 1936 is dead," recognizing that little had come of the workers' suddden rise to power; the spark of energy had not been fanned and the commissions she proposed to engage in "worker control" never created.[93] Moreover the C.G.T.'s refusal to obstruct the legislation of the "Work Statute" marked the final blow to labor reform.

> And today—what has happened? When did things change? . . . power has very quietly, without the slightest noise, changed sides, and one of these days we shall only have to open our eyes to see before us the fact that is the hardest to admit: the weakness of the working-class. Victorious without having fought, or almost, we are on the point, it seems, of seeing ourselves defeated without a struggle. That will happen if the Work Statute is adopted as a whole, or even comes close in form to what the government proposes, and is effectively applied.[94]

The Popular Front government's failure to enact reform legislation favorable to labor was but one of the considerations informing Simone Weil's critique of France in her reqport to the Free French in 1943. Published six years after her death as L'Enracinement (The Need for Roots) this document echoed the optimism and urgency of the earlier Weil, the Weil of 1936 who believed that the workers would "seize the time" and secure improved working conditions and "workers' control."

C.G.T. and the domination of Communist Party membership over its leadership.

[93]"La vie et la grève," p. 172; she wrote in 1936 that the time was ripe for the development of workers' control "if one knows how to use it" but, sadly, no one did.

[94]Petrement quotes this letter, p. 324; the Statute would have radically limited the worker's right to strike.

> A terrible responsibility rests with us. For it is nothing less than a question of refashioning the soul of the country, and the temptation is so strong to do this by resorting to lies and half lies that it requires more than ordinary heroism to remain faithful to the truth.[95]

She wrote that pre-war France had been in the grip of the Great Beast, exhibiting a "sort of drowsiness" characteristic of the spiritual lethargy of the uprooted and there must be every effort to avoid the return of this condition with the coming of peace. In addition to the "triple danger" brought about by wartime resistance—lying, killing and disobedience—four obstacles to the regeneration of the French culture were to be suppressed. These obstacles infected all, "it is doubtful whether there is a single human being on the surface of the globe who is free from that quadruple defect," Weil declared and listed them as: a false sense of greatness; the degradation of justice; the idelization of money; and the loss of religious inspiration.[96] Clearly these defects had been treated in her earlier works, the first representing the most pernicious of all because it attached humanity to the "I" and "we" rather than to the mysterious order of transcendence.

The circumstances of war served to bring a nation together in shared affliction and, according to Weil, provided the unique opportunity to build a spiritual civilization. As she had often reiterated malheur is a teacher,

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[95] Nd.Rts., p. 149.

[96] Ibid., p. 219.

the distress of war in this case infusing the entire population with an "authentic inspiration."[97] She explained, "All Frenchmen have come to feel the reality of France through being deprived of her," indicating that authentic patriotism emerges from compassion rather than ambition—a theme that dominated her tragic drama and gave depth to her hero's action. She relates the pity felt by Joan of Arc for her nation to the contemporary crisis, calling upon her compatriots to embrace the France of "the past that is inarticulate, anonymous" and vanquished by powers thoroughly lacking in love of beauty and truth.[98]

Fundamental to Weil's plan for an inspired new order—whether among the workers and management in 1936 or for the French subsequent to peace—is the belief in truth that follows from love. She rejected the notion that truth could be loved for its own sake and wrote of it rather as:

> the radiant manifestation of reality. Truth is not the object of love but reality. To desire truth is to desire direct contact with a piece of reality. To desire contact with a piece of reality is to love. We desire to know the truth only in order to love in truth. We desire to know the truth about what we love.[99]

For the laborer, the arbitrariness of orders and the mystifying character of the machinery and the processes of

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[97] Ibid., pp. 214-215: "The war must be made the teacher to develop and nourish this inspiration" which originates in suffering; note the translation of Aeschylus' notion of wisdom through affliction in this context of national salvation.

[98] Ibid., p. 232: "In order to love France, we must feel that she has a past . . . we must not love the historical wrapper of that past."

[99] Ibid., p. 253.

production precluded a love of work. For her compatriots, a love of country grounded in compassion and focused upon the reality of social conditions was essential to the task of reconstruction; so long as the "relative, limited and imperfect" character of society was acknowledged the pitfalls of illusion could be circumvented.

The basis of a new France is love which Weil expounds as the "eternal obligation" to respect life. She dismisses the emphasis traditionally placed upon "rights," arguing that "Duty toward the human being as such—that alone is eternal."[100] Physical and spiritual needs vital to all of humankind give concrete shape and content to this obligation; the metaphor of food elaborates her meaning.

> So it is the eternal obligation toward the human being not to let him suffer from hunger when one has the chance of coming to his assistance. This obligation being the most obvious of all, it can serve as a model on which to draw up the list of eternal duties toward each human being.[101]

The body's nourishment and safe-keeping is essential to the health of the soul which also requires food; fifteen necessities are enumerated by Weil as the nutrients of the soul including the least acknowledged and most important need of all: the need for roots.[102]

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[100] In the first pages of her study of a new polity she distinguishes rights and obligations, indicating the limited scope of the former and her disaffection with the principles of 1798.

[101] Ibid., p. 6.

[102] See pp. 10-40 for a review of the fourteen other

To be rooted means to belong in a "real, active, and natural" way to the communities in which one finds oneself; every human has multiple roots Weil assures her readers and all require a loving participation. Her understanding of rooted life pre-dated exile from France, having been a dominant theme in Venise sauvée and idealized in the character of Violetta; clearly the heroine was attached to the eternal life of Venice, rather than the flux of political event. Weil had also glimpsed the possibilities for worker rootedness in the joyous occupation of the factories in 1936 and written, at the time, that no matter what consequences followed from the sit-in the "fire in the hearts" of these laborers would thereafter give warmth to the cold metal of the machines they operated.

The eternal obligation to respect was understood by Weil as a reciprocal and balanced mandate—members of the collectivity owed respect because the collectivity assured food for the body and the soul and the collectivity, in turn, must respect every member by promoting the fifteen needs delineated in her study.[103] Order is the first of the needs listed and advanced as a vision of hope; Weil acknowledges that the practical balancing of all other needs suggests

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needs which include: order, liberty, obedience, responsibility, equality, hierarchism, honor, punishment, freedom of opinion, security, risk, private property, collective property and truth.

[103]The collectivity possesses a past, a tradition that enriches the life of the members, a promise of a future (by transmitting that which has been to those who are yet to be born), p. 8.

the profound difficulty in achieving balance.[104] She points to nature's beauty, the equilibrium of the universe, as a source of inspiration and assurance of a divine wisdom that lies behind all reality.[105]

Specific remedies were advanced in The Need for Roots as well as the rationale for a regenerated social order based upon transcendent value; work being the primary target of Weil's program. She concludes her study stating, "It is not difficult to define the place that physical labor should occupy in a well-ordered social life. It should be its spiritual core." In order for this to happen dignity must be restored to the effort and the proletarian lot must be forever abandoned.[106] She renounces legislative activities that would nationalize industry, abolish private property, strengthen trade unionism.

> All the measures that are proposed, be they given a revolutionary or a reformist label, are purely legal, and it is not on a legal plane that working-class distress is situated, nor the remedy for this distress.[107]

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[104] Order is not based upon a dilution of needs but an assurance that "needs are each fully satisfied in turn" (p. 12).

[105] This understanding derives from her reading of Plato's creation narrative which understands the universe's order as the result of reason's persuasion of necessity.

[106] A poster appearing on Berkeley telephone poles in the past year resonates this view; it reads: "Notice: in 1878 proletarians were needed because there was work; in 1978 work is needed because there are proletarians; workers have always criticized wage-labor, the time has come to get rid of it (unidentified source, emphasis theirs).

[107] Pp. 52-53; the distrust of governmental programs reflects her disappointment with the Popular Front and her distaste for central authority.

Programs superimposed by those who have not endured the harsh necessity of labor serve only to encourage imaginative dreams; that, in part, accounted for the failure of the 1936 movement.[108] The source of change must emerge from the malheur of the laborer, the specific conditions that have caused fatigue, anxiety, vertigo and apathy.

> We must change the system concerning concentration of attention during working hours, the type of stimulants which make for the overcoming of laziness or exhaustion—and which at present are merely fear and extra pay—the type of obedience necessary, the far too small amount of initiative, skill, and thought demanded of workmen, their present exclusion from any imaginative share in the work of the enterprise as a whole, their sometimes total ignorance of the value, social utility, and destination of the things they manufacture, and the complete divorce between working life and family life.[109]

Underlying the changes listed in the passage is a shift in the property relationships of the private and public sector; Weil proposing that neither capitalism nor socialism dominate but that a combination of the two be instituted wherein the State would hold residual rights to all property and the worker would have the gift of "machine, house and land."[110] Weil's scheme emphasizes her trust in the

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[108] Weil indicates that the workers were so enraptured by their triumph that they could not focus upon the implications of their act, exhibiting "the joy of a child who doesn't want to think of tomorrow." The assessment of real needs and possible change cannot emerge from fantasy about a better day or from the well-meaning aspirations of ideologues who have not experienced hard labor.

[109] This enumeration might well be published in any contemporary analysis of the "quality of working life" or the literature of work currently in fashion. See Nd. Rts., pp. 54-55.

[110] P. 74; her perspective reveals a traditional orientation about the work roles of men and women, suggesting

traditional marriage relationship and her projection of a training program that would ready the worker to assume the responsibility of this triple proprietorship.[111] While each worker, under this scheme, would own the instruments of labor, the workshops in which they worked would be either individually or collectively owned and the State would oversee production and arbitration, as well as licensing activities. All large industry would be abandoned for a system of interconnected small concerns; the production of goods would, in effect, be a matter of regional and local responsibility planned and implemented by worker-owners.[112]

The utopian character of Weil's proposal for economic restructuring did not deter her from communicating the urgency of its scope. "Although such a conception can only become a reality over a long period of time," she admitted, "postwar reconstruction should at once adopt as its rule the dispersion of industrial activity." The vision of

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that women secure ownership of machine, house and land only after they are widowed and demonstrate capability to manage these affairs.

[111] p. 74; marriage is the key relationship in her scheme, indicating that she had little sensitivity to those workers whose decision to remain single or divorce would preclude them from participation in ownership.

[112] The State's role is chiefly administrative, facilitating the creation of boards to adjust problems, license managers, etc.; property gifts would be financed by levies upon profits and the sale of products.

such a decentralized society had little to do with the needs of a modern economy; Weil's interest was almost entirely directed to the methods that would reduce the suffering of industrial workers and abolish the "prisonlike system" which had dominated their lives before the war. Accordingly, the role of profits, wage rates and the determinants of an expanding system were not scrutinized in her study nor did she feel compelled to justify the simplicity of the life-style she proposed for the French worker. Her interest was concentrated on the components of a workers' culture.

Early in Simone Weil's teaching career when she was still engrossed in the politics of syndicalism, she expressed a view that permeated her approach to worker's culture. It was a view critical of elitism and the hegemony of the intellectual over the substance and communication of culture. Writing for L'Effort in 1931 she decried the word handler's arrogance:

> This domination of those who know how to handle words over those who know how to handle things is rediscovered at every stage of human history. It is necessary to add that, as a group, these manipulators of words, whether priests or intellectuals, have always been on the side of the ruling class, on the side of the exploiters against the producers. . . . Yet this does not mean that the workers must reject the heritage of human culture; it means that they must prepare to take possession of the revolution.[113]

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[113] See Pétrement's account of the article, pp. 87-88; it was drafted as a defense of workers' colleges during the period she was commuting to St. Etienne to teach miners.

Although her political sympathies changed in the years to follow, the potency of this image remained and she endeavored to help the process along. She disdained the privilege of education and feared the exclusion of large numbers of people from culture, knowing that culture was connected with access to power: "Let us try to undermine this privilege," she wrote a pupil in 1934, "by relating complicated knowledge to the commonest knowledge."[114]

This approach to education entailed popularization of ideas and truths drawn from literature and science. The composition of her essay on Antigone was clearly an effort to bring classical materials to an audience that would otherwise not have access to Greek tragedy. "The search for a valid method of popularizing—a thing completely unknown up to now—is one of my imperative preoccupations."[115] After her factory experience she came to recognize that education of the working-class remained paternalistic so long as it entailed the delivery of ideas to the student without appreciating the response of the workers. Reciprocal pedagogy became a central point in her plan for a worker's culture; she elaborated her meaning first in an article prepared for the factory journal

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[114]"Letter #4," 1934, p. 8.

[115]"Letter #12," to B., 1936, p. 36; see "Letter #4," p. 8 for a similar expression of commitment.

Entre Nous in 1936. The "Appeal to the Workers at R." argued strongly for shared communication between worker and management but was rejected by the latter as too provocative for publication.[116]

The question of educational technique continued to engage Weil's interest, emerging more and more as an approach which would demystify the work-place and assure the worker's sense of well-being. The persistent belief in class inferiority, shared by management and laborer alike, had to be dispelled and the hold of rationalized labor broken; the "new order," Weil hoped, would encourage: "initiative, study, the choice of the most efficacious procedures, responsibility, comprehension of the work to be done and the methods to be employed."[117] The C.G.T. seemed the logical facilitator for this promotion of worker confidence and knowledge and the process would engage workers and their families in organized visits to the factory on weekends.

> The best means, perhaps, would be to organize Saturday visits with authorization for the workers to take their families in groups under the leadership of qualified technicians able to provide simple and interesting lectures. It would be equally worthwhile to familiarize the worker with innovations, new machinery, changes of method and improved techniques.[118]

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[116] "An Appeal to the Workers at R.," published with "Letter #10," p. 29.

[117] "Principles d'un projet pour un régime intérieur," CO, p. 209.

[118] Ibid., p. 212.

Weil also sought to encourage workers to make suggestions about work procedures to the supervisors as a further means of genuine and creative participation.

The plan for a reconstructed France called for the abolition of a confused and apathetic proletariat, replaced by a class of educated "competent professionals" who performed the tasks of labor. Weil saw this transformation as having relevance for the young who were not yet inured to harsh labor and who would be recruited as apprentices in this unprecedented program. Before the war, neither the government nor the trade unions concerned themselves with the massive problems of displaced youth nor was any effort made to establish apprenticeships which would, in effect, prove beneficial to the stability of the nation and the pocketbooks of the employer.

> Just as the capitalists have betrayed their calling by neglecting not only the interests of the people, not only those of the nation, but even their own; so the workers' trade-unions have betrayed theirs by neglecting to protect the wretched ones among their ranks, in order to turn their attention to the defense of special interests. . . . As far as the training of working-class youth is concerned, such a necessity in the public interest could not be clearer or more urgent.[119]

Weil did not discard the role of the trade union in assuming some responsibility for the training of young workers but she argued for the model created by youth groups, particularly that of the organization founded by

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[119] Nd.Rts., pp. 63-64.

Roman Catholic priests and known as the Jocistes.[120]

Her notion of the study tour reappeared in The Need for Roots as a retrieval of the medieval practice of sending youth across the land to observe the craft in various shops; the Tour de France she suggests would be internationalized and used to encourage both urban and agrarian workers to observe the variety of skills and techniques employed in production and market centers throughout the Continent.[121] In addition, all workers would be sent to the central shops of their trade to observe assembling procedures and "technical demonstrations." Eventually the workers would become teachers to the new generation of apprentices.

At the heart of Weil's approach to the education of the working-class was her commitment to the "real." It would not suffice to instruct workers in the technical aspects of their work and omit a sense of culture defined as traditional learning. She was emphatic about the role of first hand observation and the mastery of technical procedures but equally emphatic about the workers'

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[120] Ibid., p. 63: "The J.O.C. alone has concerned itself with the distress among youthful workers, the existence of such an organization being perhaps the only sure sign that Christianity is not dead in us." J.O.C. and the acronym Jocistes represents Jeunesse Ouvrière Chretiénne a group Weil elsewhere wrote of as "An example of supernatural action." (Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 484).

[121] Nd.Rts., p. 52; according to the editor's note this practice ended with the coming of the railroads, having involved the apprentice as a foot traveler.

entitlement to "intellectual culture."[122] "They must be made to feel at home, too, in the world of thought" and the arrogance of the intellectual overcome.[123]

Social and economic obstacles to learning were held up as reasons for the exclusion of the working class in "higher" education. Weil disputed this view, connecting labor to insight and elitism to immorality:

> In my opinion, work should tend, to the full extent that is materially possible, to be an education. And what would one think of a class in which there were radically different exercises for the good pupils and the bad?
>
> There are natural inequalities. In my opinion, social organization can be called good, morally speaking, in so far as it tends to lessen them (by levelling up, and not down, of course), and bad in so far as it tends to accentuate them, and odious if it creates water-tight compartments.[124]

Pre-war France, she admitted, possessed a system that was odious, treating laborers as stupid "schoolboys" with no aptitude for or interest in thought; not that the culture was too high for comprehension but that it was "mediocre" and suited to "middle-class intellectuals."

Departing from her earlier pedagogy of popularization, Weil urges that the substance of workers' education

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[122]Weil's advocacy of immediate observation can be traced to her factory experience and the realization then that abstract discussion of the factual realities of work distorts the truth.

[123]Ibid., p. 65.

[124]"Letter #14," to B., 1936, p. 45; Weil's emphasis.

be based upon "translation" of ideas and truths. The first approach results in the dilution of truths while the "art of transposing truths" preserves the integrity of an idea. Workers' common sense and experience grounds this pedagogy and distinguishes it from a patronizing and abstract approach. Geometry illustrates Weil's point, being a system of truths that has suffered "deformations" at the hands of its instructors:

> . . . nearly all our actions, the simple ones as well as the judiciously combined ones, are applications of geometrical principles; that the universe we inhabit is a network of geometrical relations, and that it is to geometrical necessity that we are in fact bound, as creatures enclosed in space and time. This geometrical necessity is presented to them in such a way that it appears arbitrary . . . . There is no need to choose between demonstration and experience. It is as easy to demonstrate with some wood or iron as it is with a piece of chalk.[125]

According to Weil's understanding of the teaching function the method of "translation" is fundamentally Christian, deriving its authority from the Gospel passage comparing bread and truth and acknowledging that a stone is not given when bread is requested. The simple "treasures" can be communicated through constant reference to the laborer's condition; geometry to the problems of the workshop and classical literature to the experience of misfortune.[126] This requires a high degree of sensitivity

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[125] Nd. Rts., p. 69.

[126] Clearly Weil's essay on Antigone anticipated this objective although, at the time of its composition, she was concerned with popularization rather than transposition.

on the part of "intellectuals—an awful name" who must be ever mindful of malheur.[127]

Among the components of Weil's plan for reform are the establishment of "workmen's universities" which would be located near the central shops and provide liaison with management, the participation of the worker in the redesign of machinery and techniques, and the end to discipline.[128] The involvement of the worker in the design of the instruments of production would prove revolutionary, introducing three basic qualities to machines: safety, flexibility with an eye to the implications of automation, and the assurance of skillful operation. Engineering research in capitalism has never considered the interests and needs of the laborer, focusing on the objectives of "more and cheaper" rather than the reality of "severed fingers and factory stairs daily splashed with fresh human blood." In addition, then, to the creation of machinery that will not place the operator in jeopardy, Weil proposes that it be challenging—prompting the worker to stretch and grow. "Professional obligation" among those responsible for innovations must include the "needs of those who do the manufacturing."

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[127]She saw the postwar period as a remarkable opportunity for this approach because the intellectuals had suffered greatly during occupation of their nation and might still feel their own misfortune.

[128]In a cryptic jotting she wrote of "a people's university on Socratic lines, to study the foundations of the crafts" long before drafting The Need for Roots" ("PWNtbk," p. 36). (Weil's emphasis)

The humiliation and belittlement Weil experienced from the remarks of the supervisors during her turn in the factory made her especially sensitive to the problem of discipline. She believed that the decentralization of manufacture and the establishment of co-operative workshops would serve to dispel the arbitrary exercise of authority. Her vision was one which saw labor illuminated "by poetry" in a busy but free atmosphere:

> A workman or a group of workmen could have a certain number of orders to fulfill within a given time, and be left with a completely free hand in the actual layout of the work. It would be a different thing altogether from knowing that one had to go on repeating indefinitely the same movement, in obedience to an order, until the precise second when a new command came to impose a different movement for an equally unknown length of time. There is a certain relation to time which suits inert matter, and another sort of relation which suits thinking beings. It is a mistake to confuse the two.[129]

This same vision invites the expression of curiosity among the workers and channels creative energy toward the constructive activities which nourish joy in the workplace and delight in friendships.[130]

Weil addressed herself to the problems of the peasantry as well in her discussion of workers' culture and the reconstruction of France, demonstrating her basic

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[129] Nd.Rts., p. 60.

[130] The Tour de France plan would have the dual effect of opening the worker's eyes to a variety of approaches and feeding the inherent restlessness of young people. Certainly Weil's travels to Germany and Italy provided experiences that helped her to reach beyond her Parisian perspective and must have been in mind when she composed these passages of her long essay.

impatience with urban chauvinism and the tendency of the radical left to ignore the wretchedness of their plight. Observing the alarming rate at which the rural worker has departed from the countryside and come to the city in the years before the war, Weil indicates that measures should be taken to encourage the farmer to stay on the land. "Peasant uprootedness has been, over the course of the last few years, as mortal a danger for the country as working-class uprootedness."[131]

The remedies she would apply to the wounds of the rural population resemble those related to the urban laborer insofar as a mix of socialism and capitalism emerges: large holdings would be broken into smaller ones and transferred to the peasant. Weil imagines "peasants cultivating vegetables and similar products intensively, each on his own little strip, and at the same time, with modern equipment, applying extensive methods of cultivation co-operatively over vast areas of them in common."[132] Pensions would be given to the old to assure a secure retirement, presumably (although not stated) drawn from taxes and administered by the government. Both young men and women would

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[131]Ibid., p. 80; note that Weil compares the rural crisis with that of the black colonial—both having been torn from a traditional life and a sense of joy in the simple labors of the farmer. Weil's perspective is not without a touch of romantic nostalgia for the "good life" of a time past.

[132]Ibid., p. 83.

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participate in a travel program to the rural communities of France and abroad, an activity designed to meet the "travel obsession" before settling down to a farm life based upon the nuclear family structure.

The "culture of the mind" of peasants required, according to Weil, a similar translation of truths offered to the worker in the city but the substance would differ. The content and emphasis of learning would reflect the farmer's engagement directly with nature and seasonal rhythms; "the main object of all education in the villages should be to increase the feeling for the beauty of the world, the beauty of nature."[133] Folklore, rather than the tragedies of ancient Greece, would be explored as would parts of the New Testament, especially those parables conveying the nobility of rural life.

Labor reform addressed to the economic needs of the urban or rural worker without concern for the moral and spiritual wellbeing of the same met Weil's scorn. Body and soul must be equally treated in a civilization based upon worker dignity and short-term correctives would only exacerbate the moral malaise she identified with modern life. From her perspective the key problem was that of incentive—a reason for laboring that would nourish and stretch the human actor. However, concentration upon wage

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[133]Ibid., p. 87; by contrast, the beauties of geometric principle and the elegance of mechanics would be the subject of workers' instruction.

and hour reforms, offered by the unions, or property shifts envisioned by the Marxists, would never touch the problem; "acquisitiveness and the fear of dismissal must cease to be the main incentives ever in the foreground of a workman's mind."[134]

The enticement of higher wages only serves to nourish the idolatry of money and the obsession with material comfort. Weil insisted upon an approach that would nourish the sense of accomplishment in a day's effort, arguing for a program of training and educational opportunity, the demystification of the workplace, the dimunition of "the proletariat lot" through an economy of competent and confident laborers. She was similarly impatient with the idea of a shortened workday—not because the notion of leisure was seen as pernicious to human morality but because she feared a nation of "idlers, who for two hours a day would be slaves." If anything the hatred of labor would deepen among the workers and support even greater instability. The change must be qualitative, concerned with attitudes toward and experiences of time on the job; she wanted to dispel the "clock-watching" compulsion of the laborer and supplant this habit with one of job involvement and satisfaction.

Nothing in her program would promise an end to the physical discomforts of work as such; she called for the

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[134]"Factory Life," Politics 1946, p. 374; it is of note that the "quality of working life" literature resonates these views without the spiritual language found in Weil's writing.

removal of procedures and machinery that jeopardized the health and mental growth of the worker. Automation, comparatively new to industrial activity when Weil was writing, was also embraced as an innovation that ought to be tapped for the reduction of monotonous and stupefying labor.

> Whenever an operation calls for these repeated sequences of a small number of simple movements, an automatic machine should perform them. . . . Men are preferably used now because they are machines that can obey a voice, and it suffices to receive an order for them swiftly to substitute a certain combination of movements for another. . . . But if a person had for his task the regulation of an automatic machine . . . he would assume, on the one hand, his share of the synthetic and intellective efforts required, and on the other, a manual effort involving, like that of the artisan, real skill. Such a relationship between man and machine would be entirely satisfactory.[135]

The "worst assault upon the worker was, in her opinion, "Taylorization," a system that killed the spirit and poisoned the life of the nation. Its separation of the planning and execution stages of labor fostered the awesome consequences within the factory of arbitrary authority and a terrible docility. Workers believed themselves to be incompetent in all activity except the mechanical repetition of certain gestures; engineers and supervisors believed themselves superior and entitled to abuse those under their charge. Herein the division of intellectual and manual labor perpetuated itself and flooded over into the entire culture, creating the basis for inequity in all manner of things. Fragmentation on the job, Weil explains, drains

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[135]Ibid., p. 374.

the worker and fortifies a further division between work and the family; the two domains are kept apart but the pain of the former permeates the life of the latter and adds to the instability of society.

> The dreary exhaustion from factory work leaves a gaping void that clamors to be filled. It can be filled only by rapid, violent gratifications the resulting corruption of which is contagious for all classes of society . . . . The family can expect no consideration among the people of this country as long as a part of that people continue to work in loathing and disgust.[136]

The vision of a free society in which labor functions as an integrating and enobling force was first conceived by Weil in the essay she embraced as her "Testament."[137] Written almost a decade before The Need for Roots it offers a strong rationale for the encouragement of workers' control through knowledgeable and responsible action as well as the nourishment of solidarity born of collaborative effort.[138] Although no mention was made of the role of metaxu in this earlier discussion of a regenerated society, Weil advanced a notion of balance between individual and collectivity.[139]

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[136]Ibid., p. 375; the studies currently made about work dissatisfaction indicate a correlation with family disorders including spouse and child violence.

[137]"Reflections," O&L, passim, pp. 37-123.

[138]Ibid., p. 106: "Social relations would be directly modeled upon the organization of labour; men would group themselves in small working collectivities, where co-operation would be a sovereign law . . ."

[139]See "PWNtbk," p. 27 where Weil defines freedom of work as a balance of individual and collective needs.

She also considered the method of educating the worker, dismissing Lenin's approach to consciousness of social injustice as a weak model and suggesting the re-establishment of schools of arts and crafts constructed on the principles of Descartes' experiment.[140]

The one condition essential to the free society proposed by Weil in 1934 was the unfettered development and use of human reason:

> There is but one single and identical reason for all men; they only become estranged from and impenetrable to each other when they depart from it; thus a society in which the whole of material existence had as its necessary and sufficient condition that each individual should exercise his reason could be absolutely clearly understood by each individual mind. . . . Such a society alone would be a society of men free, equal and brothers. Men would, it is true, be bound by collective ties, but exclusively in their capacity as men; they would never be treated by each other as things. Each would see in every work-fellow another self occupying another post, and would love him in the way that the Gospel maxim enjoins.[141]

The message of the Gospel became the ground for Weil's later essay on rooted society; reason continued to be a critical factor in the humanization of work but the spiritual needs of the soul emerged as the sine qua non of the new civilization.

A Theology of Work

> It needs a lot of labour to express what is true —and a lot also to receive what is true.[142]

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[140] "Lenin's 'Materialism . . .,'" O&L, pp. 35-36.

[141] "Reflections," pp. 99-100.

[142] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 122.

Nowhere in Simone Weil's writing does she admit to the construction of a theology of work or explicitly acknowledge the tradition of Christian speculation about the place of labor in the divine scheme of things. She approached the subject a witness to awesome times, a world gripped by the cruelties and violence of economic depression and war, refusing to submit to the despair her own gloomy prognosis of a future invited. She wrote of a spiritual labor in a redeemed society, exhibiting her deep commitment to the disclosure of truth and the retrieval of justice among even the most disheartened people.

Her historical account tells of the Great Beast's tyranny over the western world, the domination of brute force and lies which has driven the modern citizen to false aspiration and vapid belief. The social order reflects this destiny by inverting all values, by worshiping means and discarding the only real end available to humankind; the idols of greatness and money have displaced humble solicitude for others and a singular desire for the good. In spite of this course, the "hunger for finality" persists and the profound confusion between means and end proves not to be fulfilling. "All is intermediary in this existence, all is means, finality is nowhere involved," Weil writes adding, "Necessity is everywhere and good hidden."[143]

Industrial labor demonstrates the nature of the

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[143]"Condition première," CO, p. 262.

Great Beast's enslavement, crushing the strong bodies of the working class into submissive robots and scattering any hope of individual achievement to the winds. It reduces all the features of human life to a sad shadow of the vitality, creativity and curiosity inherent in the thinking being; it offers only illusion and a paltry wage to its victims. Disgust seizes such workers and they indulge themselves in dreams of a revolution or a miraculous salvation but they do not act for themselves nor do they dare consider the real conditions of their plight. Weil describes this escape from reality with a bitterness toward the Marxists, whose theoretical position should deter such fantasy, and argues that the veil of illusion must be lifted. Economic palliatives are not dismissed nor political readjustments, but she denies that the moral inertia of the workroom can be touched by either: "bread is less necessary than a remedy to this sorrow."[144]

A spiritual crisis requires a spiritual solution. Weil's perspective was firmly established even before she experienced the religious moments that brought her to a consciousness of her attachment to Christianity. In her earliest analyses, she understood that the loss of purpose and the lack of vision weighted down the worker as much as the onerous schedule of tasks and meager pay. With her factory labors she came to appreciate, even more, that while the body suffered from fatigue and injury the soul

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[144]Ibid., p. 264.

suffered from humiliation and the futility of daily work. Uprooted by the job and detached from the society, such workers could only seek solace in remedies that would further blind them to their life. They were veritable captives in the cave of modern production, moving mechanically through their days in the artificial illumination of factory lamps and misleading promises.

The spiritual remedy in Weil's theology was expressed with vigor in her later writings, calling for a revolution of the body and soul—not with arms or economic strategies but through the discovery of the one end available to God's creatures: the intermediary of beauty. The light of transcendence possesses the warmth and plentitude of meaning that releases the afflicted laborer from despair. Weil's program insisted upon the abandonment of all conditions that foreclosed the laborer from receiving such light; thus, the wage system, the pace of work, the character and scale of machinery, the attributes of "Taylorism" would have to be reformed in order to assure a physically safe and congenial atmosphere. The soul's needs must be met as well, allowing the malheur of labor to be transformed into a sense of joyous participation in a higher life. To accomplish this "they have only to raise their heads" Weil avers—to move their bodies and to accept the void in the center of their being so that divine grace may penetrate their souls.

> The difficulty for them is in raising their heads. They do not have many things to

> encumber them as is the case with others better off; they have very little. But they lack intermediaries.[145]

Weil reasoned that the exhausted worker whose eyes knew nothing of the universe's beauty would not be able to initiate the physical and spiritual movement essential to the reception of grace. Intermediaries, metaxu, which promote this shift are well established in the churches, in communities that have celebrated the splendor of creation; ritual and liturgy are, however, removed from the daily concerns of the worker. They need not be remote, however. Weil declares: "How much greater the necessity of such intermediaries at the workplace where one goes solely to earn a livelihood! There thought is directly attached to the earth."[146]

The task is the preparation of worker consciousness—not with respect to a future utopia where the proletarian reign but in recognizing the presence of divine inspiration in all facets of life. The worker exposed to harsh necessity is a privileged worker because there are no screens between that condition and God; the circumstances of affliction bring the laborer into direct contact with supernatural love. Hence, Weil argues, there would be no reason to contrive fitting images about transcendence and the connection to labor; material reality abounds in symbols. It suffices to approach the inter-

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[145]Ibid., p. 265.

[146]Ibid., p. 266.

mediaries as a mirror tarnished by human breath requiring only the cleansing of the glass and the reading of the signs. The inexhaustibility and variation of such symbols promise that no worker will be denied access to the eternal truths "inscribed in matter for all eternity."

Weil's spiritual epistemology distinguishes between discursive and intuitive knowledge and points to the latter as the basis of symbolic understanding. She writes that modern science and philosophy have dismissed both the symbol and the significance of its meaning:

> Concern for the symbol has completely disappeared from our science. And yet, if one were to give oneself the trouble, one could easily find, in certain parts at least of contemporary mathematics, such as the theory of aggregates or the integral calculus, symbols as clear, as beautiful, and as full of spiritual meaning as that of the circle and mediation . . .
>
> In contemporary philosophy, analyses likely to lead to a complete theory of sense perception have appeared all over the place under different forms. The fundamental truth, which such a theory would reveal, is that the reality of objects perceived by the senses does not reside in sensible impressions as such, but solely in the exigencies of which the impressions constitute the signs.
>
> The sensible universe in which we find ourselves has no other reality than that of necessity; and necessity is a combination of relations which fade away as soon as they are not sustained by a pure and lofty concentration on the part of the mind. This universe around us is made up of mind materially present in our flesh.[147]

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[147] Nd.Rts., pp. 292-293; geometry is endowed with images that convey the elegance of thought and the beauty of God's creation—the circle and the triangle are two such images. The motif of infinite and finite are expressed in this mathematical language which has a direct significance for the manual laborer who relies upon the principles of the science to construct the artifices of human life.

The communication of symbols to the laborer in the workplace is a pedagogy of dignity and connection; symbols open a passageway in the laborer's vision to see the radiance of truth. The lesson of the symbol is that of impossibility, the mysterious unification of opposites which the intellect tends to reject. But "Impossibility is the door of the supernatural"—a pre-condition of knowing that complacency and illusion bar the way to authentic life.[148]

The three elements of Weil's theology of work reflect something of the impossibility she identifies with supernatural truth; malheur, attention and metaxu represent inversions of the everyday existence of the laborer working under the shadow of the Great Beast. Weil renounces the affliction that crushes the body and spirit of the worker, yet that very affliction is a privilege which promises the spiritual worker a connection with the absent God. Attention is advanced as a method which calls upon the worker to remain immobile and move toward the needy. The bridges of the social order are attached to a world that can never be perfected. Each of these elements shows the paradox of human life separated from divine Good but longing for reconciliation. Pain can disable the human actor or it can serve as the wrenching force that carries the same wretched being to a place where the light of truth

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[148] See G&G, section on "The Impossible," pp. 147-150; "It is necessary to touch impossibility in order to come out of the dream world."

protects and nourishes.

> The function of pain is to separate the united opposites, and then to unite them again (which constitutes joy) on a higher level than that of their initial union . . .
>
> Pain is violence, joy is gentleness, but joy is the stronger.[149]

It is appropriate to Weil's philosophy of contradiction as "the criterion of the real," "the test of necessity," that she convey each of the three components of her theology of work in symbolic terms, suggesting the function of metaxu through this approach. The Cross represents an intermediary to the affliction of work, a symbol of the suffering Christ and the mandate to obey necessity as limiting principle. Attention as the step back from action is conveyed by the symbol of the seed (mustard and pomegranate) which is an infinitesimal sign of divine love. Several symbols recur in Weil's discussion of metaxu; the bridge dominates but both the blind man's stick and the lever convey the idea of extension beyond boundaries or obstacles.

Distance between Creator and creation shapes the relationship of the human actor to pure good, beauty and truth. Following Plato's creation account in the Timaeus, Weil explains that the Supreme Artisan persuaded force to submit so that the human actor could function with some

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[149] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 601; Weil writes that "Pain is a metaxu" that tears the victim from illusion.

security in a "web of determinations." Thus, necessity is the evidence of divine attachment in spite of the Creator's withdrawal from the affairs of the world. It means that limitlessness is checked by order—the sea's action conforms to certain limits, as does the rotation of the earth and the variation of seasons. The order of the universe, the subject of Stoic love (amor fati), exhibits reason's triumph over the indeterminate and the fact that humankind is endowed with reason underlies the responsibility to imitate the Creator:

> Forces in this world are supremely determined by necessity; necessity is made up of relations which are thoughts; consequently, the force that is supreme in the world is under the supreme domination of thought. Man is a thinking being; he is therefore on the same side as that which dominates force . . .
>
> So long as man submits to having his soul taken up with own thoughts, his personal thoughts, he remains entirely subjected, even in his most secret thoughts, to the compulsion exercised by needs and to the mechanical play of forces. . . . But everything changes as soon as, by virtue of a positive act of concentration, he empties his soul so as to allow the conceptions of eternal Wisdom to enter into it. He then carries within himself the very conception to which force is subjected.[150]

Given this theology of creation, Weil reasons that work must be an activity—the sole activity—that exercises the highest degree of intelligence and obedience. Where thought is obstructed and obedience compelled there is no imitation of divine creation because consent must be secured which requires consciousness of necessity. Therein

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[150] Nd.Rts., p. 291.

lies the fundamental distinction for Weil between liberty and oppression.

The Cross as symbol represents creator and suffering son. In the first instance the two planes—horizontal and vertical—communicate the infinite space of God's realm and the finite place of humankind; similarly, the horizontal plank is to be interpreted, according to Weil, as a sign of God's descent to earth and the vertical plank a sign of human yearning to reunite with the Supreme Creator—arms outstretched across the distance. The same symbol represents a spiritual "quartering" of the world, "crucified between the fixed stars and the sun; crucified on the cross of Time" for "Creation already corresponds to a passion."[151]

The worker is to be introduced to the significance of obedience through the image of wooden planks and living trees. Weil's notes are rich in her elaboration of this theme: she refers to the practice of American Indians in hanging clothes from tree limbs, the Almond Tree of Grimm's fairytale as the "tree of the world," the significance of the living tree as the channel of sunlight and lightning. The "spiritual treasure" of the folktale is to be explored as a focus for her symbolic pedagogy and the tale of the "Cobbler and the Princess" tapped as illustrative of the authentic movement of human actor toward

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[151] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 380; "The celestial cross—this is Time and Space."

divine truth.[152] In that narrative the worker is promised the hand in marriage of the young princess but he must first cross a dense forest in a limited period of weeks. His first effort, chopping down individual trees, proves unsuccessful and a wise man tells him he must go "across the forest," an instruction that has no meaning until he climbs a tree and perceives the expanse of the forest. He then crosses from on high and wins his reward. Weil explains that the lesson to be learned from this tale is that supernatural truth is secured by fixing one's gaze on the end (Good) and not becoming distracted by the obstacles (Evil) that seemingly must be abolished before proceeding (chopping down the trees).

Another perspective offered by Weil on wood is the distinction between living and dead matter; Christ was hung on dead wood in perfect obedience while Adam and Eve disobeyed the Creator and picked from living wood.

> The living wood stores the solar flame. But it is the dead, dry wood that gives it to men.
>
> Thus the tree is the hero of a sacrifice analogous to the Incarnation . . .
>
> The tree of life gives fire. The tree of sin gives fruits . . .
>
> Wood that is burnt suffers a passion . . .
>
> The Sun, the Father. The wood, Christ. The light, the Spirit. The sun gives the light to the tree and the tree gives it to men.[153]

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[152]"NYNtbk," pp. 245-246, 270; for references to trees, wood, etc., see ibid., p. 191, p. 277.

[153]"NYNtbk," p. 249.

The earth yields fruit to the human laborer, but, in turn, the laborer must endure and accept malheur and, in so doing, become identified with Christ's sacrifice. To obey, however, is to be cognizant of one's act and not pursue laborious effort under the lash for "labor can be submitted to either in an attitude of revolt or one of consent."[154] Knowing and desiring to imitate Christ's sacrifice constitutes a reversal of purpose:

> That which is below resembles that which is above. Hence slavery is an image of obedience to God, humiliation is an image of humility . . .
>
> Let that which is base in us go to the bottom in order that that which is noble in us may go to the top. For we are reversed beings. We are born like this. Re-establishing order means unmaking the creature in us.[155]

The method by which "the creature in us" is transformed, according to Weil, is through attention, "the sole faculty of the soul which gives access to God."[156] It can be practiced on many levels of intensity, thus separating the more rigorous supplicants from those who have only begun the pilgrimage toward God. But this does not signify that there are chosen practitioners; on the contrary, Weil would have every human practice attention in order to

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[154] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 592: "Work—this is always man acting as a counterweight to the universe. And the pain of work is transformed into passion when man works without personal motives and incentives . . . . Anyone who works unconsciously does not imitate the Crucifixion."

[155] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 241.

[156] "Condition première," CO, p. 270.

experience the eternal light and truly recognize and love the beauty of the world . It is a method that will "bring God into this world instead of removing oneself out of the world."[157]

"Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty," Weil writes indicating that this void permits the truth to penetrate. Such a practice cannot be undertaken without instruction—it is prayer in its purest form—and ought to be the major concern of education.[158] The tolerance for repetition of an exercise and the suspension of immediate desire must be taught; it is work and will yield with constant effort. What attention develops is the attitude of patient vigilance which emerges from love and expectation rather than a sense of assurance that a prayer merits reward.

Weil captures this meaning of prayer in the following passage:

> Waiting patiently in expectation is the foundation of the spiritual life . . .
>
> If a soul cried to God in hunger for the bread of life, incessantly, indefatigably, like a new-born child whom its mother forgets to feed . . .

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[157] "NYNtbk," p. 195; Weil rejects the image of mystical endeavor as a rising from this world and presents it, rather, as a concerted effort in prayer that entices divine light toward the earth.

[158] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 597: "Since prayer is but attention in its pure form, and since studies constitute a gymnastic of attention, it follows that every school exercise should be a refraction of spiritual life." See also "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies . . .," in WG, pp. 105-116.

> The Virgin's milk, the Father's seed—I shall have it if I cry for it. The cry is the first resource granted to a human being. What we could never get by work, we cry for. The first nourishment flows from the mother and is given in response to the child's cry; there is no question of work.[159]

The continued cries appeal for compassion from the Father, a beseeching call of faith and promise to obey. The symbol of the seed represents the nourishment provided as a consequence of this intense appeal. Unlike the symbol of the Cross which conveyed in Weil's theology of work warmth and light generated by the harsh necessity of labor, the symbol of the seed represents growth. But this growth begins only after malheur has shattered false expectations and prayer has suspended concern for self.[160] The circular image of death and rebirth displaces the tyrannical image of the pendulum that ceaselessly swings to and fro without connection to the universe's order.

> To become a child of God it is necessary to die and be reborn. To be engendered by the seed of God.
>
> An incorruptible seed is sown in the body.[161]

Fatigue, humiliation and submission prepare the soul of the spiritual worker for the seed of grace which grows like a "tree in our soul," requiring the light from

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[159] "NYNtbk.", p. 99.

[160] Weil writes that God creates and humans destroy, referring to the reciprocal relationship which finds the human actor obediently subject to the will of God.

[161] "NYNtbk.," p. 113; note that Weil distinguishes carnal and spiritual destiny using the image of seeds from Genesis 1:29-30 ("London Ntbk," p. 343). See also "NYNtbk.," p. 199.

heaven for nourishment. The effort is continuous—suffering for the passageway of light, attention for the implantation of the seed that will grow upward toward the heaven that feeds it. Remarking on the error of the Church in regarding the crucifixion as a completion, Weil avers that it is a condition for spiritual development, providing the image of transformation that never ceases.

Focusing upon the education of the agrarian laborer whose proximity to nature's constancy and seasonal variation is noted, Weil argues for a liturgical program that reinforces the spiritual message of the earth's intermediaries.

> Plough the soul as one ploughs the earth to prepare it for the seed. Labor the soil of oneself.
>
> This theme should continue throughout the period of tillage and conclude at the sowing.
>
> And then "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die." It is a theme that can last from the harvest, when the wheat is cut down and killed, until the next seed-time. Ploughing the fields is the preparation for a burial.
>
> Ask God to kill and bury us spiritually while we are in this world. Burial in total renunciation and silence . . .
>
> Once the ground is well prepared, if only the seed is received by it and is protected from interference, it grows all by itself. The light and water that fall from the sky make it grow . . . all the time the seed is growing. And although the peasant doesn't think of it all the time, there is always somewhere inside him the happy certainty that the crops are growing.

> When the soul has once received an atom of the love of God, there is nothing to do but wait and let it grow.[162]

The symbol of the seed teaches three fundamental lessons: work is the pre-condition for seizing upon the order of the universe (the Creator's work of creation); patient acceptance of God's will is the way of faith (the waiting of Christ upon the Cross and the impaled Prometheus); and the nurtured seed invites our participation in the infinite (the true meaning of the Eucharist as offering).[163] Of this last teaching Weil writes:

> Peasants should keep a little grain to grind and make eucharistic bread for themselves all the year through.
>
> Explain to them that work does literally consume and burn up the flesh, and therefore in a sense their own flesh has been transformed into this bread. To consecrate this bread makes it Christ's flesh. By eating it and digesting it Christ's flesh becomes their flesh. The cycle is completed.[164]

Thus the content of the intermediary of attention draws upon the vegetative cycle. Weil suggests that a "spiritual almanac" be composed with these themes as well as the creation of a special order of persons dedicated to the instruction of these materials. The latter

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[162] "NYNtbk.," p. 264.

[163] Prayer is to be unconditional, asking that we be given the ability to adhere to God's will ("NYNtbk.," p. 150); the sacramental facet of attention has also been described by Weil in relation to the ingestion of beauty: "Beauty is something to be eaten; it is a food" (Nd.Rts., p. 93).

[164] "NYNtbk.," p. 265, also p. 229: "Bread-seed of the sun."

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would be responsible for establishing "study circles" and facilitating special masses oriented around the seasonal cycle; the laity are to be participants in the masses, preaching from their experience and the lessons from Scripture. Other sources of inspiration would include folkstories having rustic themes and new images.[165]

Weil rejoiced in the abundance of symbols relevant to different occupational activities and suggested that for each there could be particular liturgies. In spite of the differences she also believed that attention was the reconciling method that would obliterate the evil opposition between manual and intellectual labor that had persisted since antiquity. "The point of unity is contemplation" she stated in confidence that the division in labor that Marx had correctly perceived as the worst of consequences would yield to this method.[166] The intellectual might be persuaded to rely less upon discursive reasoning and practice the intuitive form that manual workers exercised; this appreciation by the former would prove to lessen the sense of superiority that lay behind social distinction.

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[165]Ibid., p. 266; Weil is careful to note that new images be the result of the Holy Spirit, echoing her fear of literary efforts which assume responsibility for moral themes and twist the meaning into popular motifs.

[166]"Condition première," pp. 269 & 270; she indicates that injustice will dissolve as the light of eternal truth enters the lives of manual and intellectual workers.

Weil, however, was somewhat ambivalent about the equality of occupations with respect to spiritual life. In her last essay and her earliest (the "Testament") treating the subject of a civilization of work she concluded that manual labor was in a superior position:

> If the foregoing analyses are correct, the most fully human civilization would be that which had manual labour as its pivot, that in which manual labour constituted the supreme value . . .[167]

On the final page of The Need for Roots she asserts, echoing this earlier view: "It follows that all other human activities, command over men, technical planning, art, science, philosophy, and so on, are all inferior to physical labor in spiritual significance."[168] In the intervening years she elevated the artist to this position arguing that the abandonment of the genius to God's inspiration brought this occupation to the gates of transcendent reality. Her return to manual labor as the "supreme value" reflects the centrality of malheur in the theology of work—the belief that affliction is the sine qua non for authentic love of the universe.

Critical to Weil's theology of work is the discussion of Love in Plato's Symposium which tells of a "spirit" neither mortal nor divine but intermediary between the two.[169]

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[167]"Reflections," p. 104. [168]Nd.Rts., p. 302.

[169]There are numerous references to her indebtedness throughout the Notebooks, see, for example, Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 439; the key passage in Plato is Section 196 of The Symposium.

Metaxu, the connections of spiritual and mundane life, reflect the substance of the narrative attributed to Diotima in that dialogue which describes Love as a mediator or God's messenger. Following the myth's account of Love' origins in the treachery of Penia (Poverty) who seduced the sleeping God of Plenty (Poros) and the character of the son whose destiny is variously impoverished and enriched, Weil advances this same Love as affliction and consent.[170] As the offspring of poverty, Love "wanders about poor, ignorant, homeless"—the image of Jesus, the "vagabound." Love "does not submit to force" nor "does it force," it teaches the art of governance; it embraces the Just One, Prometheus and the Soul of the World.[171]

The symbol of the blind man's stick recurs in Weil's writing as a vehicle for grasping the real. In the context of metaxu for work Weil writes the blind man's stick involves:

> responsibility, inventiveness, etc., in short, there is action wherever man is handling things that can in this way become like extensions of his own body, by transmitting signals directly to his soul. It is in this that the true nature of work resides . . .[172]

The self is extended into the world and experiences affliction; it becomes transformed, or materialized, as it labors upon the resistant earth:

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[170] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 518. [171] Ibid., p. 450.

[172] "PWNtbk," p. 37. (Weil's emphasis)

> To labor is to place one's own being, body and soul, in the circuit of inert matter, turn it into an intermediary between one state and another of a fragment of matter, make of it an instrument. The laborer turns his body and soul into an appendix of the tool which he handles. The movements of the body and the concentration of the mind are a function of the requirements of the tool, which itself is adapted to the matter being worked upon.[173]

As the farm worker patiently awaits the growth of the crop and the industrial laborer makes adjustments to noise, tedium and monotony, the spiritual worker must also learn to be an apprentice, transforming affliction into an instrument of love.[174]

The blind man's stick is a symbol of the worker extending self into nature and the lever, another of Weil's recurring symbols of metaxu, refers to a lifting process which demonstrates that an infinitely weak being may raise an obstacle. "We have to lower when we wish to raise," wrote Weil in expounding the paradoxical workings of a simple device that has meaning for the spiritual laborer in the context of solidarity.[175] Her theory offers the two-fold advantage of indirection and effortlessness; in illustrating this with respect to the removal of a rock in the pathway she states:

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[173] Nd.Rts., p. 300.

[174] According to Weil the blind man's stick enables the worker to feel the universe's movements and link the arms to the stars and the sun (Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 222). See also "NYNtbk," p. 96 for imagery of the eucharist and the wheat farmer's physiological transformation as offering.

[175] Ntbk., Vol. 1,.p. 163; references to the lever are numerous in the Notebooks, see Vol. 1:44, 72, 126; Vol. 2:383,411.

> One should conceive at the same time the existence both of the rock as a limited object and of oneself as a limited being, and the relationship between the two: lever. If one simply relies upon the lever, effort of any kind may even be unnecessary.[176]

The lever instructs the worker that achievement of a spiritual goal demands a pause before the action, a veritable suspension of self-interest and the expression of genuine empathy for another. The crucified Christ and the impaled Prometheus are exemplars—silent and suspended in their respective sacrificial postures. Friendship, the basis for solidarity, ought to imitate the lever's principle, minimizing exertion (or power) and allowing the movement of compassion to lift the obstacles between two actors.

> Friendship. So long as we are seeking some good in a human being, the conditions for friendship are not present. He must have become necessary, he must be a need. We are then at his mercy, and we want him to be at ours. But if, nevertheless, we still want him to keep the faculty of free consent, there is Pythagorean harmony. That is friendship.[177]

The notion of harmony underpins Weil's symbol of the balance which is especially relevant to her discussion of social order and human responsibility for justice. She poignantly writes of the <u>metaxu</u> as bridges that have been misused as surfaces upon which to construct illusory approaches to a better world.

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[176]Ibid., p. 163.

[177]"NYNtbk," p. 92.

> The bridges of the Greeks. We have inherited them. But we do not know what use to make of them. We have imagined that they were for building houses upon. So we have erected sky-scrapers thereon to which we are continually adding fresh storeys. We do not realize that they are bridges, things made to be crossed over, and that is the way leading to God.[178]

Reaching beyond ourselves through technological invention is not disdained by Weil but she is wary that it is given as evidence of human autonomy from supernatural life, that homo faber has built so high into the sky that no eternal light can be transmitted through the clutter of artifacts. Such pride in achievement, in false greatness, has twisted the value of human life and requires profound reassessment and change. Similarly, the withdrawal of others from modern activity with a cynical shrug or a devout testimony to the good of another realm represent errors in understanding. It is only in this world that labor can be offered to the divine, that affliction and patience can be experienced as supernatural techniques.

Balance must be achieved according to Weil between the pull of the earth and the vision of transcendence. True balance is a union of opposites, the union of limit as love and limitlessness as power. Weil describes the beauty of the Greek statue adorned in graceful folds carved of stone as the image of equilibrium: docile and powerful "the whole represents the human form in its immobility and at the same time endowed with all the ability to accomplish

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[178] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 370.

all movements.[176] The balance conveyed by the statue is present as well in the Cross which, according to Weil, is a "union between and separation of opposites." In both instances gravity is defied—the point of balance is free from the downward pull and resembles all bridges which lie between two banks without movement.

Weil's imagery of balance, equilibrium and metaxu provides a vision for the practical humanization of the workplace. She argues for the restoration of the balance point, for justice that distributes fairly and relieves the worker of heavy burdens.

> All of the technical and economic problems ought to be formulated in relation to a conception of the best possible condition of labor. Such a conception is the prime norm; all society ought to be so constituted that labor will never be performed in such a manner that it pulls down those who execute it.[180]

The disequilibrium brought about by "Taylorization" which opposes mind and body must be rectified and the instruments of labor modified so that they conform to the scale and proficiency of human ability. The ultimate task requires the lifting of the weight of oppression and lies in order that the worker become free to consent to spiritual life, to embrace the limits of Necessity that prove divine love of humanity and obey the laws of nature with a genuine sentiment of belonging at home.

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[179] Ibid., p. 461.

[180] "Condition première," p. 272.

> If one knows in what respect society is unbalanced, one must do what one can to add weight to the lighter of the two scales. Although the weight is bound to be evil, by using it with the intention of re-establishing the balance, it may be one thereby avoids any personal degradation. But one must first of all have clearly recognized where the balance lies, and be ever ready to change sides, like Justice, that "fugitive from the camp of the victors."[181]

Force is pervasive in the social order, incessantly throwing relationships into a state of disharmony. The remedy for imbalance can never be complete or comprehensive but its healing action ought to create and nourish the metaxu.[182]

> We should turn everything into an intermediary leading toward God (everything—occupations, events, public functions, etc.). This does not mean adding God on to everything (it is then the imaginary form of God). But each thing must be wrought upon to bring about a change so that it may be made transparent to the light.[183]

In order to "wrought" social institutions as receptacles of supernatural truth the worker must first withdraw into an attentive stance and then having seen the light "turn it on the world."[184] The new civilization of spiritual labor will be radiant in divine illumination, having no dark corners or dreary workrooms. But Weil never promises the realization of this civilization; it remains a vision

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[181] Ntbk., Vol. 2, pp. 466-467.

[182] Ntbk., Vol. 1, pp. 48-49. [183] Ibid., p. 328.

[184] "A public life in which all works, in each of the separate acts of work performed, in all the national holidays, in all the relations existing up-and-down the

and a worldly interpretation of the mystical image of liberation that nourished her person and her hopes for a better day. The image fittingly conveys the potency of love.

> Our soul is the egg within which this divine germ grows to a bird. As an embryo, the bird feeds on the egg; once it has grown it breaks the shell and emerges and pecks for grain. Our soul is shut off from all reality by an enclosing skin of egoism, subjectivity, and illusion; the germ of Christ, placed in our soul by God, feeds on this; when it has grown enough it breaks the soul, explodes it, and makes contact with reality. That is Love in the microcosm. Love in the macrocosm, when once its golden wings have grown, breaks the egg of the world and passes to the place beyond the sky.[185]

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social scale, in all art, in all science, in all philosophy, it were possible to read the supernatural truths" (Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 557).

[185]"NYNtbk," p. 288.

LA PORTE*

Ouvrez-nous donc la porte et nous verrons les vergers . . .

Open the door to us, and we will see the orchards,
We will drink their cold water where the moon has left its
trace.
The long road burns, hostile to strangers.
We wander without knowing and find no place.

We want to see flowers. Here thirst grips us.
Waiting and suffering, we are here before the door.
If we must, we will break this door with our fists.
We press and push, but the barrier still holds.

One must weaken, must wait and look vainly.
We look at the door: it is closed, unbreachable.
We fix our eyes there; we weep under the torment;
We see it there always; the weight of time crushes us.

Before us is the door; what use for us to wish?
Better to turn away, abandoning hope.
We will never enter. We are weary of seeing it . . .
The door, opening, let so much silence escape

That neither the orchards appeared nor any flower;
Only the immense space where emptiness and light are
Was suddenly everywhere present, overflowed the heart,
And washed our eyes almost blind under the dust.

—*Reprinted in Panichas,
pp. 408-9

CHAPTER V

THE READING OF SIMONE WEIL

> We should give real thoughts a real existence, keep imaginary thoughts within the bounds of empty imagination. It is therefore always a question of reading.
>
> And if there are two real thoughts? We should contemplate them together, weigh them in a true balance, then act.[1]

The Sense of Lecture

The earth is beautiful, Weil proclaims, but few experience this fact because the atmosphere is cluttered by phantoms which obscure the God-given order of the universe. Eye and mind have become inured to the false reality shaped by the "Great Beast." A terrible malaise, she concludes, permits illusion to flourish and fosters a treacherous social association which deceives and humiliates the laboring population. Work's purpose has been shorn of meaning and is accomplished principally under great duress for a meager wage.

The malaise of industrial society is a consequence of centuries of uprooting and social dismemberment. A veritable loss of sight has developed because vast populations have been severed from the cultural traditions and

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[1] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 53.

rituals that functioned as metaxu, intermediaries bridging the distance between this world and the realities of transcendence. In spite of this grim picture, Weil offers a way through the "veil" of illusion; it is a regimen but not a cure. She writes of lecture, the method of attentive reading, as a technique that introduces the novice reader to the reality of the impossible unity. The mystery of truth, beauty and good as one, as a reality that lies beyond the human experience in perfection, prompts the reader to abandon the idols of the social order and begin the long pilgrimage toward God.

This method of reading is integral to Weil's theology. The vocabulary of lecture echoes that of her discussion of Creation and the Passion; words of hiddenness, endurance and patience recur. The stance of suspicion Weil adopts towards that which appears, in the physical environment or in a text, indicates her indebtedness to Descartes and Plato. The latter's creation narrative informs her notion of supernatural distance and is coupled with Christian revelation to construct a view of the relationship of hidden reality and absolute love. God is "given to us through a sense of absence":

> God and the supernatural are hidden and formless in the universe. It is good that they should be hidden and nameless in the soul. Otherwise we run the risk, under a name, of having something imaginary.

> . . . God has only been able to create by hiding himself. Otherwise there would only be he.[2]

The image of powerless but embracing love teaches creation to respond through imitation. Weil explains that our physical appearance is a veritable mirroring of divine reality, our bodily exterior hiding the soul which is the source of true love. Just as the supernatural and natural realms are separated, the fragile inner being may remain unknown and therefore malnourished. But God has given the Son to creation so that this silent place will come alive through faith. The Passion instructs humankind, as does the primordial moment of Creation, in the mystery of supernatural love and the loving function of withdrawal. Weil writes:

> Faith consists in believing that God is love and nothing else.
>
> . . . Like a child in play, hiding from its mother behind a chair, so God plays at separating himself from God behind the creation.
>
> This joke of God's is what we are.
>
> Believe that reality is love, while still seeing it exactly as it is. Love what is intolerable.[3]

Paradox shapes Weil's message—the supernatural refuses power and is hidden, the mediator Christ is given to us as affliction endured to bring us closer to the impossible,

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[2]Ibid., p. 230 and p. 240.

[3]Ibid; Weil admonishes St. Augustine for not following his maxim amare amabam (in love with loving) far enough: "If he had stuck to that, he had found the way" (ibid).

love is the way to God requiring that the self become hidden to itself (that is, that the ego be dissolved). Weil urges us to imitate Creation through our self-negation and to imitate the Passion through our acceptance of affliction. She implores us to "Embrace what is made of iron, press flesh against metallic hardness and chill."[4]

Gravity weighs the myopic and lethargic down. To overcome the force of this downward energy Weil prescribes a regimen of attention and reading beyond the layers of apparent reality. This regimen demands both tolerance of affliction and a patience for the unyielding character of truth. The trained eyes and muscle of the athlete are, at the very least, required for the task of lifting the heavy cover of illusion from the earth's surface. Weil explains that accomplishment in transforming the self into a tool—the blind man's stick—will hasten the process. Thus the work of the body and the work of the mind are one:

> To labor is to place one's own being, body and soul, in the circuit of inert matter, turn it into an intermediary between one state and another of a fragment of matter,make of it an instrument. The laborer turns his body and soul into an appendix of the tool which he handles. The movements of the body and the concentration of the mind are a function of the requirements of the tool, which is itself adapted to the matter being worked upon.[5]

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[4]"NYNtbk," op. cit., p. 260.

[5]Nd.Rts., op. cit., p. 300.

The novice reader of texts learns to approach words as if a user of the blind man's stick, slowly tapping out and around the surface to gauge the parameters of the immediate reality. With practice the parameters deepen and the surface gives way to the layers of necessity, order and supernatural reality in that sequence. Since the "universe is made up of mind materially present in the flesh" the self must simultaneously diminish and expand: first must the reader abandon preconceptions and complacent judgments, then must the self stretch out through and beyond the fingertips to the orderly arrangement of the universe. The process requires a painful apprenticeship which few are willing to endure.

The apprenticeship in reading teaches the practitioner to look intensely, to develop a particular kind of literacy that sees the surface as illusory and the richness of multiple readings as critical to eventual mastery. What appears to the untrained eye as acceptable, becomes for the disciplined reader a permeable mantle under which lies the signs of God's eternal presence. Weil describes how the reader must <u>wrench</u> away from habit and "pass from one meaning to another by an effort"; the difference for literate and illiterate with respect to life's meaning is inescapable. Weil illustrates this point:

> . . . A Frenchwoman receives a letter saying: "Your son has been killed." [Weil writes this phrase in English.] If she does not understand English, her first sight of the characters has one sort of effect upon her;

> if she does understand it, another sort of effect (e.g. she faints). Thus, by essays in apprenticeship, we change the power posessed by sensations to modify us.[6]

The social implications of a population literate in Weil's method of reading are equally considerable. Lecture does not require intellectual gift nor a privileged education. On the contrary, it is a method based upon an openness to truth and an abandonment of the idols created by the social order. The traditional reader is educated in reading texts without involvement of the critical sense and accepts the imaginary constructions of others. The apprentice reads first from an intuitive intelligence of reality as a "composition on multiple planes." This stance rejects passivity and elitism, engendering a respect for others and a humility toward the self. In short, lecture represents a method of grasping the ineffable without need of explanation and creates a tolerance for human limitation.

Approaches to the Theology of Work

> To read in outside things what we carry within ourselves—inevitable. How manage to escape it? Or even to turn it into a means of reading truly? Possible resource: ANALOGY.[7]

The irony remains that work as a subject of theological discourse has not yet been lifted from the periphery

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[6] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 22; in undertaking "superimposed readings," the literate reader moves beyond sensation to necessity and the knowledge of God's mysterious unity.

[7] Ibid., p. 45.

although it is recognized as a critical human activity. The reasons for this neglect are not altogether clear. However more than a decade ago a French theologian shared his embarrassment with his colleagues when asked to address himself to the question of a "theology of work."[8] He announced that modern Roman Catholic theologians had shunned the issue because the scope proved unwieldy and few theorists were prepared to write about an experience that was entirely alien to them. His comments, in part, echoed Weil's concern about the necessity to know a reality for oneself and once knowing something about industrial production from the perspective of a laborer recognizing that traditional rubrics and approaches to the analysis of labor could no longer be used without radical change. Thomas warned that phenomenological analyses of the industrial workplace would upset Church teachings on the subject of work; his conclusions paralleled those of Weil in calling for a "radical restructuring" of doctrine and the responsibility of the Church to this reality.[9]

Throughout her writings on labor and the restoration of dignity to the laborer Weil articulated a view of revolution that departed from nineteenth century socialism.

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[8]Joseph Thomas, "Esquisses Théologiques," in Travail et condition humain, Paris, 1962, pp. 34-46.

[9]Thomas denies that the Papal teachings offer a theology of work as such and argues that the pastoral writings of many of his colleagues (e.g., Chenu, Rondet, etc.) on the subject have yet to synthesize all of the insight that is needed for a theology.

She expressed an abiding commitment to Liberalism understood as an ideology of individual freedom. But her position derived from the belief in human choice and not the notion of a fundamental set of rights guaranteed by nature, political contract or the supernatural. Her insistence upon consent to the limits upon the will is fundamental to a revolutionary theory that is at once political and theological. Having observed the factory as a system of modern enslavement which devastated the spirit and allowed for no exercise of intelligence or judgment, Weil demanded that change in the physical and social realities of industrial work process consider the destiny of humans as workers in God's creation.

The revolution envisioned by Weil is concerned with the scale of the human body and the monolithic shadow of the machine; she would reverse the relationship which understands the machine-tender as a slave to the machine. Weil would demand that the worker stand straight with head lifted. Her vision resonates Plato's allegory of the cave:

> If one follows the allegory of the cavern, one should see on the wall of the cavern a shadow of oneself, corresponding to the light of the fire—and, having emerged from it, but still looking at the ground, a shadow of oneself, but produced by the light of the sun (evil in itself? necessity in itself?) and an image of oneself in the water (level of the <u>metaxu</u>, of mathematics and of love). On

> lifting up one's head, one sees nothing more of oneself.[10]

A bent body and a dull gaze characterize the laborer's appearance. Weil is determined to introduce intermediaries (metaxu) into the workroom as a means of transforming the worker into a freely choosing actor who consents to necessity as the sign of supernatural presence in the universe.

Weil applied the same standard of freedom from human constraint to actors in the social and political realm. The hero was described as a counterweight to the force of gravity, an actor who would symbolically rectify the disequilibrium perpetuated by the "Great Beast." This image of the counterweight undoubtedly originated in her reading of Plato and interpreting his dialectics as a "means of emerging from the point of view" through "contradiction and analogy."[11]

The dispute with Marxism was, in good measure, an expression of Weil's attempt to emerge from a "point of view" based upon ineffective dialectics. Weil rejected the notion of a progressive movement toward the good that was couched in a language of "impenetrable emptiness." She entered the workroom precisely because her contemporaries in the French Communist Party espoused a system and

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[10] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 46; Weil noted in her factory writings that the Renault plant was like Plato's cave, the workers in contact with a shadow-like reality that deprived them of knowledge about the machines, the work method, the net results of their effort.

[11] Ibid., Weil's emphasis.

a vision she believed to be rhetorical and unreal; she transformed herself in this movement from the classroom to the factory into a veritable counterweight to test Marxism.

The teaching of Plato, on the other hand, with respect to dialectics nourished her intellect and supported her effort to unite spiritual and intellectual methods. Although her indebtedness to Plato was not explicitly noted in her earlier writings, at the end of her life she was adamant in her renunciation of "dialectical materialism" and her attachment to Platonic dialectics.

> Plato named dialectics that movement of the soul which, at each stage, in order to rise to the sphere above, leans for support on the irreducible contradictions wherein it finds itself. At the end of this ascent, it is in contact with the absolute good.[12]

The method of contradiction and analogy was entirely compatible with the approach Pétrement describes as Alain's "doctrine." As his student Weil learned that "attention" is that form of contemplation "vibrant with doubt and freedom"—a restless perspective that encouraged inquiry and the search for parallels.[13] That Weil followed her mentor's way cannot be doubted; her Notebooks attest to this allegiance as does this self-prescribed maxim: "As

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[12]"Is there a Marxist Doctrine?", O&L, p. 190; this essay was composed during the London period and was never completed.

[13]Note S. Pétrement, op. cit., p. 33 for review of Alain's approach.

soon as we have thought something, try to see in what way the contrary is true."[14]

Plato influenced Weil's approach to thought and her attachment to the imagery of mathematics. The latter, in turn, was incorporated in her discussion of lecture as a technique of transposing values. The circle was embraced as the perfect form, having within it the one and the many; the center, Weil mused, was not unlike the sun in the allegory of the cave: all realities (radii) take shape and meaning in reference to that center. Translated into her notion of "multiple readings," the center of the circle is the place "from which may be seen the different possible readings—and their relationship—and our own only as one among them."[15] This perspective is a humbling one which instructs the reader that the flat surfaces of a text or a geometric form, for that matter, are starting points toward knowing something of truth. The apprenticeship in reading will propel the reader from this linear perspective into the circle itself with its many radii and gradually the reader will become adept at discovering contradictions and analogies.

The method of reading has not been acknowledged by theologians of work but at least one expression of the need for many perspectives has been heard in recent years. Cardinal Suhard has called for the collaboration of scholars from diverse disciplines to pool their skills and

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[14] G&G, p. 156. [15] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 47.

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insights for the construction of a theology of work. His invitation indicates that the complexity of the subject lies beyond one scholar's grasp and that a "multiple reading," in effect, will produce a theology more sensitive to the realities of twentieth century society.[16]

In order to locate Weil's contribution in the discussion of theology of work, three theologians have been selected as partners in a collaborative exploration of this subject. Following Weil's geometric imagery of the circle, all three writers will be "read" as lines or radii leading toward the center which is, in turn, the heart of theology of work. Clearly there are countless contributors to the discussion if one reaches back in time or beyond the confines of French Christian thought.[17] However, the three theologians who are juxtaposed in this brief analysis are contemporaries who have shared a common history, language and theological perspective; only one, Ricoeur, is a Protestant (Chenu and Lacroix are Roman Catholic).[18]

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[16]Note appendix to "Travail et humain condition," op. cit., p. 192 for reference to the Cardinal's remarks.

[17]Note the bibliography at the conclusion of this study which refers primarily to recent developments; the Protestant discussion is well-documented.

[18]Note Paul Ricoeur, "Work and the Word," in History and Truth, 1965, pp. 197-219, Jean Lacroix, "The Concept of Work," Cross Currents, 1954, and M. D. Chenu, The Theology of Work, 1966.

The multiple reading proposed by Weil assumes that the signs on the surface are salient to the discussion of reality but not the reality itself. Accordingly, she invites the reader to resist taking the words of a sentence as the message; lecture persists through the sensation to another dimension. For Weil the symbols of geometric science rather than the linguistic formulations of algebra check the imagination and promote the grasp of analogy.[19] The ultimate goal of reading is to "suspend one's judgment: not to read."[20] She sought to discover "images and words that reflect the mental state without images or words" in her own compositions and chose to communicate the theology of work through certain images. Forms, shapes and colors, she reasoned, break through the straight line and touch what is shared by all human beings—the vast beauty and order of the universe. Her use of the "blind man's stick," the almond blossom, the pomegranate seed, the rebounding ball , the lever are indications of this effort to elude the illusory effects of language and capture something of the Real.

The "blind man's stick" recurs in Weil's discussion of reading and of spiritual labor. It has a basic meaning which conveys the pervasive darkness of the world and the groping activity of an unsighted population that has no inkling of the supernatural. While the efforts of the blind

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[19] Ntbk., Vol. 1, pp. 44-45.

[20] Ibid., p. 45 and p. 42.

are helped through the instrument that locates obstacles in the path, the blind man's stick in Weil's understanding only becomes truly useful after an apprenticeship has been undertaken. This training proves to be extraordinarily painful because the blind must accept and trust the limits of reality and surrender to an order totally independent of the conjectures of the mind and the fantasies of the imagination. The novice must submit to necessity and shed the caution that has been nourished by living in the dark. Weil explains that necessity's veritable "blindness" (or impartiality) assures the blind tool user that the risk is well worth the malheur. "In order that Good may pass into existence, Good must be able to be the cause of what is already entirely caused by Necessity."[21]

The ego must be obliterated and the stick taken up as the vertical length of the crucifix. The movement, Weil avers, is a double one which crosses over death, it transports the blind "from ignorant suffering to the knowledge of illusion—from dissolution to becoming." Put more lyrically, Weil writes:

> May the whole universe, from the pebble at my feet right up to the remote stars, with all that lies between exist for me unceasingly . . .
>
> . . . May the whole universe become for me a second body in both senses.
>
> But one only attains to this by a methodical transformation of oneself.

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[21]Ibid., p. 99, Weil's emphasis.

> It is through action—a certain non-immediate type of action, requiring an apprenticeship—that the blind man's stick becomes a prolongation of the body.[22]

The simultaneous holding back of the self as an ego and the extension of the body into the universe occurs briefly and with a result that brings only an inner sight of supernatural light. In a second image—the blossom—Weil communicates the fragility of this moment. In the Notebooks where she muses upon the meaning of the almond tree blossom in the Grimm story of the same name, she indicates that the tiny white flower is a near perfect form of beauty: untouchable, pure and vulnerable.[23] "Beauty alone," Weil assures us, "makes it possible . . . to be satisfied with that which is."[24] The horror of malheur is tempered by the joy of perceiving God's presence in the world through the indirect recognition of beautiful things, precious and delicate life.

Her tragedy builds upon this symbolism of fragility: Violetta is the innocent heroine who is named for the tiny Spring flower, Jaffier is a native of the French province that has been destroyed by force, Venice is potentially a victim of mercenary barbarism. Venise sauvée is, in short, a drama about love that is not physical, that is not consumated by bodily touch; hero and heroine are attracted to one another

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[22]Ibid., p. 60.

[23]Note the discussion of "The Almond Tree" in "NYNtbk," especially p. 262.

[24]Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 596.

because of their shared love for the city that lies beside the sea and celebrates its connection to supernatural origins in the ritualistic marriage ceremony of official to water.

But Weil always communicates her imagery as paradoxical experience. The love of beauty shared by Violetta and Jaffier is for the blossom and the root of the city; the fragile quality of its existence is known to Jaffier on a political level, the rooted nature of the Venetian is known to Violetta on a spiritual level. This theme of double meaning is repeated in the image of shell and seed as hidden or tiny life that bears a possibility of enormous proportion. The grain of wheat becomes the bread that nourishes, the New Testament "mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds" and yet it will bring from its almost imperceivable existence a new life for creation. The soul is fertile soil for the seed of grace when, as a consequence of malheur and attention, a place is made for its growth. Weil writes:

> The Holy Spirit is also the seed which falls on every soul. To receive it, the soul must become simply a matrix, a vessel; something plastic and passive, like water. Then the seed becomes an embryo, and at last a child; Christ is born in the soul. What used to be called "I" and "me" is destroyed, liquefied; and in place of it there is a new being, grown from the seed that fell from God into the soul.[25]

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[25] "NYNtbk.," op. cit., 287; the reference to Proserpine's eating of the tiny pomegranate seed recurs in her Notebook jottings.

This new life, Weil explains, is not that of another being but the engendering of the "same being a second time." She writes of the return along a "closed circuit," the circular sweep appearing to be a motion away but "really an approach."[26] The circle represents a third symbol and perhaps the most salient in Weil's theology of work as it refers to the fundamental reality of human purpose as means.

The metaphor of the rebounding ball captures the truth of the pattern: we work to eat, we eat to work. "Living organisms," Weil reminds us, "have no external finality." We cannot rise toward an end and must accept that a conversion of ourselves into inert matter is the sole technique of escaping the pendulum-like swing of our lives. "It is only real feelings that possess this power of transferring themselves into inert matter."[27]

The circle teaches the virtue of indirect action—motion away is motion towards. Thus we do not seek the supernatural as an object but look to this world as a manifestation of the Creator's love and embrace the beautiful in nature. We love the supernatural through our obedience to necessity's limitations and step back each

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[26] Ibid., p. 199; Weil often states that "truth lies in the circle."

[27] "LNTbk," op. cit., p. 364, also Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 167; the former citation was written just days before Weil's death and is placed in the context of an Irish fairytale about the satiation of a girl and her antipathy to strawberry jam thereafter because the matter and the pain have been interlocked in her experience.

time before we act to consider what those limits are; we become lever users, removing a heavy stone through a wooden plank which lowers in order to lift.

> To draw back from the object we are pursuing. Only what is indirect is effective. We do not accomplish anything if we have not first drawn back. Lever. Ship. All forms of labour.[28]

We must restrain our movement Weil warns and act only with reference to the means. In that way we will go forward and beyond the reality shaped by the forces of gravity. We ought to act, she advises us, because we are impelled from necessity—otherwise our act will fail as a corrective to the disequilibrium that characterizes society. Her meaning of obedience *from* necessity rather than *for* an objective (reward, etc.) is expressed in the following passage.

> However much we give of ourselves to others or to some great cause, whatever suffering we endure, it is out of pure obedience to a clear conception of the relationship between things and to necessity, we make up our minds to it without effort, even though we may accomplish it with effort. We cannot do otherwise . . .
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> Breton cabin-boy's word to the journalist who asked him how he had been able to act as he did: "There was nothing else for it." Purest form of heroism, (More frequently found among ordinary people than elsewhere.)[29]

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[28] *Ntbk.*, Vol. 1, p. 169. (Weil's emphasis)

[29] Ibid., p. 155; note her statement in *C.O.*, p. 165 that "One is in the world in order to obey and be quiet." In that reference Weil is bitterly denouncing the oppression of the factory.

Herein lies the truly radical dimension of Weil's theology of work which demands that all labor be given the right to think about every gesture and act as a consequence of knowledge based upon necessity not fear of the whip. Human obedience, quite simply, is owed only to necessity or to a legitimate authority that imitates the limiting principle of necessity (the law). Force cannot be a basis for extracting any human effort and each laborer is responsible for dissipating its crippling effects by refusing to give fealty to it. That, of course, assumes a level of understanding that has been nourished by the intermediaries (metaxu) grounded on religious symbol and ritual. Polity and subject are, ideally, read together—the needs of the individual continuously reviewed by the State, the orderly administration of the law assessed by the citizen.[30]

Weil's images of circle, lever, blossom and blind man's stick are not repeated in the essays of the theologians set in juxtaposition for a "superimposed reading" of theology of work. One among the three—Ricoeur—shares the greatest similarity with Weil, identifying certain problems that produce illusory answers and advancing a vision of the civilization of work which will dispel oppression. He, too, shares Weil's suspicion of the word read only in its surface relationship and argues for a limiting construct that will produce greater clarity in

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[30] Ntbk., Vol. 2, p. 553.

work's meaning.[31] Ricoeur recognizes the tool as an extension of the body but his sense of this reality is markedly different from that of his compatriat and predecessor whom he never mentions (nor do his colleagues in this comparison).[32]

Ricoeur's analysis is prefaced by an ambivalent expression about the zealous reception work has received in intellectual history. He writes that the "discovery or rediscovery of man as worker is one of the great events of contemporary thought" but it is blighted by confusion. The word work has become inflated, its meaning co-extensive with every human activity. This "triumph in a void," he states, demands the discovery of a construct that will retrieve the true "splendor of work" which is its "being in debate with other manners of existing." His anxiety is simply stated: "A notion which signifies everything no longer signifies anything."

Traditionally contemplation has been contrasted with work but Ricoeur denies this construct's utility as a genuine "contrary." Contemplation remains aloof from the human experiences of militancy, the veritable struggle

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[31]Ricoeur, op. cit., p. 198; note H. Rondet, "Elements pour une theologie du travail," Paris, 1955, who takes note of the necessity to pierce the layers of obscure understanding.

[32]Although each of the theologians refers to Mounier's influence on his thought, no reference is made to Weil's contribution in spite of her availability to them (linguistically and intellectually).

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with nature, and finitude. "It is a chimera," he adds, "which withdraws from us, it fails to consider the full scope of the human." The "spoken word," by contrast, is an appropriate "counter-pole," sharing the fundamental reality of an activity that makes and in turn is made.[33] Both word and work are toilsome activities that contribute to human self-actualization; the latter fabricates, however, goods that are consumed by society and the spoken word signifies.

> The word, we said, does not "make" anything, at most it incites to action (whether this be by another or by myself treated as another); but if it incites to action this is because it signifies what is to be done and because the exigency signified to another is "understood" by him and "followed" by him.[34]

Work, Ricoeur avers, prompts words and words, in turn, promote invention; it is "the spoken word which upsets the established form of the gesture and the tool; failure and suffering plunge man into reflection and questioning." This observation leads Ricoeur to a refinement of the spoken word as a set of moods that have consequences for the laborer. Closest to the activity of physical labor is the imperative mood of the spoken word which prompts reflection about technique and organization of work tasks. The dubitative and invocational moods, by contrast, refer

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[33]Ricoeur quotes the maxim: faire et en faisant se faire (make and by making, make oneself), p. 198.

[34]Ibid., p. 204. (Ricoeur's emphasis)

to questioning and requesting respectively. The dubitative is pre-eminently critical and revolutionary, challenging the idols of a civilization. Without this form of denial, Ricoeur argues, there would be no affirmation: "in the world of the dubitative word there are contestations . . . in the world of contestation . . . there are affirmations."

Invocational words are essentially addressed to the evaluative domain. While the dubitative word prompts concern for the possible, the concern for the better emerges with this mood which asks the value of an act. "Work," Ricoeur suggests, "is human work beginning with this question concerning the personal and communal value of work; and this question is a matter for the word."

If the civilization is to prosper all three moods of the word must be harmonized with the work-world; Ricoeur cautions:

> Our whole analysis of the dialectics of work and the spoken word warns us that a civilization which fails to maintain this sort of intangible communication between the critical and poetic function of the word and the efficacious function of work is condemned in the end to stagnation. A civilization retains momentum only if it assumes all the risks of the word and establishes a right to error as an indispensable political function. This risk of the word is the price that a civilization of work must pay for the service which the word renders to work.[35]

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[35] Ibid., p. 216.

Four services are rendered by the spoken word, each contributing to the realization of human autonomy and dignity. The arrogance of a division of labor based upon social class and access to "liberal" education is challenged by the spoken word and performs, in short, a remedial service that constructs egalitarian social relationships. Not only ought the educational system be reformed, breaking the age-old distinction between manual and intellectual labors, but this reform, Ricoeur insists, must encourage the political participation of those who have been systematically ignored, disdained and forgotten in Western history.

The second service of the word ought to shatter the objectification that has cast a long shadow over producer and product alike. The worker has surrendered to the frenzy and monotony of machine tending, adapting in such a way that intelligent and imaginative action has been displaced by a general malaise. The intellectual worker is not exempt from this process according to Ricoeur; they, too, reveal how pervasive the consumer values and apathetic mood. Ricoeur observes that intellectual "merchandise" is traded and consumed in much the manner of material products. He calls for compensatory and foundational changes (the third function of the spoken word) to reduce the divisiveness of work culture, recommending that leisure activities be made more interesting, that technological wisdom gleaned from the laborer's <u>praxis</u> be assimilated

into the theoretical realm. Such a culture, based upon the spirited involvement of every worker, would encourage aesthetic appreciation shaped upon an unfettered notion of creativity and not the preponderant one of "high culture."

The many similarities between Weil's vision of a revitalized social order and Ricoeur's program of a civilization of work "in which work is the dominant social and economic category" suggest a fundamental agreement. However this would be deceptive given Weil's emphasis upon the spiritual needs of a population and Ricoeur's apparent interest in the substantive cultural reform brought about by a radically changed economy. Although Ricoeur shares Weil's antipathy to centralized administration, to the money fetish of capitalism and to the idolization of machinery, he is basically oriented toward change that does not reach the depths and heights of Weil's vision.[36]

Weil cannot set aside the reality of oppression as a condition attached to the use of force by those who must subdue and destroy the life of others. Moreover she cannot ignore the terrible damage to mind, body and spirit that comes with technological values and organizational principles of rationality. How can the disheartened and broken emerge whole? Where will the confidence and trust come from to make workers active participants in a new society? These

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[36]Ibid., pp. 214-15.

questions are theological ones in Weil's scheme, relating to the human purpose and its distance from God's loving purpose for creation. Material reforms are not dismissed by Weil as inappropriate but they are the proverbial "band-aids" that cover a deep wound and provide neither respite from pain nor hope of cure. Only with spiritual transformation recognized by the body politic as the preservation of those intermediary relationships (metaxu) that nourish the soul and through the establishment of definitive programs bringing beauty to places where ugliness has long reigned will the fragile health of human civilization persist. Weil's hope was equally fragile.

Anxiety about technological development and human destiny is expressed by the second theologian, Lacroix, in his concern for the locus of work.[37] He echoes Ricoeur's concerns from a metaphysical perspective and asks how the teachings of the young Marx on liberation can be understood in the context of the pursuit of truth. His response suggests something of Weil's theology of work, indicating that the triad of pain, attention and mediation are essential concerns for the analyst.

Lacroix's point of departure is also linguistic but he does not approach the spoken word as a contrary to work;

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[37]Lacroix, op. cit., p. 236-7; note his reference to Mounier's phrase: "la petite peur" (the little fear).

his study indicates the relevance of etymological scholarship for an appreciation of work's toilsome connotation. Struggle and exertion are associated with the word "labor" (the French travail) because the root word in Latin is tripalus, an ancient apparatus used for the harnessing of large animals.[38] Lacroix interprets this meaning closer to Ricoeur's notion of human militancy than Weil's experience of malheur.

> All work is a painful effort to emerge from a situation, it is a struggle with an environment in order to transform it with a view to a better living and a better being; it is a meeting with an obstacle, a nature, which at first is foreign and which one wants in one way or another to assimilate oneself. All work is a sign of alienation. But it is remedy also to this alienation.[39]

Work depends upon human determination to overcome the resistance of matter and takes its definition from this transformational endeavor that unites passivity and activity. Civilization, according to Lacroix, "is nothing else but an idea at work in the world."

Achievement provides the joy in work which dispels the awesome pain of transforming matter. Lacroix explains that the scholastic understanding of work as a dual effort which simultaneously perfects the work and the worker continues to illuminate the meaning of this activity.[40]

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[38]See L. Febvre's article on the word's evolution (longer reference in bibliography), infra.

[39]Lacroix, op. cit., p. 237.

[40]The Latin formulations: perfectio operis (perfection of work) and perfectio operantis (perfection of

On the one hand, a sense of accomplishment emerges from the surrender of the self for the purpose of creating something; this is a gesture of "metaphysical generosity," which elevates the product. On the other hand, accomplishment is an experience of self-realization and consciousness of the product as object standing apart from the producer. Lacroix's analysis accepts dualism and the human condition of living with contradiction. "To work," he avers, "is to contradict contradictions" but not to resolve them.

It is Marx's notion of contradiction rather than Plato's to which Lacroix has recourse in his examination of the relationship of nature and freedom. Human beings are of nature and the negation of nature—their work represents the reconciling moment wherein alienation gives way to liberation. "The specific remedy to this alienation," according to Lacroix's restatement of Marx, "is precisely work, which has as its effect to replace the given and hostile nature with another nature created by man and subject to him." Unlike Weil who takes issue with Marx's optimism about the triumph over necessity, Lacroix accepts this principle as the humanization of both matter and worker.

He does not recognize Marxian epistemology, however. Lacroix returns to the scholastic formulation, noting that thought originates in the producer's assessment

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the worker), ibid., p. 239.

41 Ibid., p. 247.

of the product: "One must first make; and it is through thinking over what one has made—or over what mankind has made—that one finds oneself little by little and takes hold of oneself."[41] The movement is circular but begins in the process of working, not in the material worked upon; a dualism remains between matter and spirit—the laborer's task is never finished.

> Man is made to work, transform, create, but also to reflect upon all his creations and constantly to regain self-possession, so that he might never lose himself in any of them. It is this going-and-coming between creation and reflection which constitutes all human history . . . . Because we live in time, it is not given to us to reach ourselves: our creation is always toilsome, our thought always inadequate and our ethics always provisional.[42]

Lacroix and Weil verge on agreement with respect to the inadequate functioning of work institutions and the failure of the process to yield joy . Lacroix expresses it in these words: "Any society which jeopardizes the joy in work, which dissociates the finished work from the worker and therefore joy from exertion, is an intrinsically evil society which is heading for its downfall."[43] Weil indicted "Taylorism" as the scheme that severed the laborer's head from body and left the spirit shattered; she, too, recognized as evil the separation of effort and product but emphasized the notion of work as means. While technological scale and organizational process created much

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[41]Ibid., p. 243.

[42]Ibid., p. 247.

[43]Ibid., p. 239.

of the despair Weil found within the factory, she did not believe that ideological shifts in power would lessen this burden. Lacroix does not explicitly promote socialism as a panacea to the joyless work-world but indicates that it is superior to capitalism in the basic recognition of work as a sociable activity and the "social right" to work.

Lacroix concludes his analysis with an assessment of the human vocation as three-fold: work, thought and contemplation. The last refers to a gratuitous event associated with a hope that originates beyond human comprehension and effort; a "glance of faith." He observes that contemplation invites the human actor to momentarily overcome all dualisms: nature and freedom, matter and freedom are united in the transcendent realm. But, this fundamental distinction in experience—mediatory activity (that is work) and grace—need not promote a division between supernatural and terrestial hope; the former is not, Lacroix cautions, "a sort of compensation for the defeats of the world." On the contrary, hope is the unifying experience that recognizes human ingenuity with spiritual calm. Adding in words that have a Weilian flavor:

> One wastes one's time in condemning Prometheus when it would be more appropriate to baptize him, which can be done only if one begins by existing with him. And the idea of a Christian Prometheus would seem to me apt to renew our thoughts and to incite our acts.[44]

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[44]Ibid., p. 249. (Lacroix's emphasis)

However close the language, Weil's meaning is substantially different from that of Lacroix with respect to a Christian Prometheus. She urged her readers to recognize in the impaled figure of that ancient Greek a pre-figure of the crucified Jesus; there would be no need to baptize him but a great need for those who call themselves Christian to empathize with his agony and, through that compassionate experience, become truer Christians. Moreover, Weil would not focus upon Prometheus as the symbol of technical achievement; hers is an emphasis upon the infinite presence of metaxu in the temporal world.

The fundamental distinction between Lacroix's and Weil's efforts to make Christian the tragic pre-Christian hero lies in the latter's delineation of spiritual labor and its role in a civilization of work. The idols of the ambitious would be shattered and the joy of labor would be fed by the light of knowledge that was accessible to all; community life would foster a responsibility for neighbor and earth's beauties. The transformation of the laborer from egocentric actor to selfless participant is critical to Weil's vision.

Lacroix writes of transformation and struggle in the work process. His notion of alienation is close to Marx's discussion of the opposition of human actor to nature: work, according to Lacroix, "is an activity grappling with resistances, wrestling with a given thing which it strives to turn to its ends through an effort of the will." By

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contrast Weil interprets transformation not as a combative struggle between worker and matter but a gradual submission of the former to the latter; the experience of *malheur* is undeniably painful and death-like, metamorphosing the self into an object (a wooden stick) that no longer craves immediate fulfillment of specific ends but accepts the reality of everything (movement and purpose) as means.

Liberation is the objective of work in Weil's account as it is in Lacroix's analysis but the latter emphasizes this as a release of the self from nature; in effect, work humanizes nature and releases the self *for* greater self-actualization. Weil understands liberation as the release of the self *from* the self occurring at that very moment when necessity's limits are truly known and experienced (as through the "blind man's stick").

One further distinction in meaning between Weil's and Lacroix's theological perspectives requires elaboration. Both acknowledge the reality of dualism as a source of bewilderment and agree that *attention* is the method which will reduce this inherent disjunction in the human condition. However, Lacroix locates both the nature of the dualistic experience and the method on a different plateau. In his discussion, attention is nothing but the reflective stepping aside and assessing the work done by the worker; essentially the opposition lies in the product (or matter) and the consciousness of the self in relation to that object. Attention, he avers, is both

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evaluation and the cognizance of the "spirit's activity and presence."

The method of attention in Weil's scheme of spiritual labor assumes the division of worker and divine being; as the worker descends into the emptiness of malheur and becomes materialized (numb to desire), the physical universe becomes an undifferentiated skin, a new body for the spiritual laborer. This bodily extension which is at once a cosmic wrapping of the worker does not assure an end to dualism; attention promotes only a glimpse of identity with all of God's creation, it is not a bridge across the abyss that divides Good from Necessity. Unlike Lacroix's understanding of attention as a reflective stepping back from the object one has created, Weil writes of a non-active moment when movement ceases, when the body is lifted from the seeming repetitious swing of the pendulum to the swirl of the unitary circle; discursive thought ceases as well and only an occasional intuitive grasp of the mystery of transcendence is experienced.

Chenu's approach to a revitalized civilization of work starts with a celebration of the new consciousness of the proletariat. This third writer observes that a breakthrough is underway that is as exciting and difficult as that achieved by St. Thomas centuries earlier. The scholastic philosopher's synthesis of Christian beliefs with Aristotelian teaching is being paralleled in the industrial world with the worker's new effort to unify

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values and technological innovation. Chenu notes that the same kind of fear that haunted the thirteenth century Church has returned to challenge the work processes and techniques of the twentieth century.

> Fear is always a bad counselor. In these circumstances, this philosophy is defeated by the violence of history. The Christian, even though he be a theologian, is consequently imprisoned in the limited confines of conservative casuistry.[45]

The force of Chenu's indictment falls on nineteenth century ideology and its germination of theological sentimentality and anachronistic moralisms. Utilitarian philosophies of individual happiness and liberalism's bankrupt notions of moderation in the economic arena permeated theological doctrine and that doctrine persists into the contemporary world as a system of mistaken notions about human enterprise. It is not appropriate to esteem the artisan and reject the laborer as a worker-manqué, nor to insist that "traditional" values are fixed forever as the expression of God's infinite morality in the world. Chenu declares that this makes for bad theology and an impossible anxiety that refuses to accept the role of "homo artifex" as theologically inspiring.[46]

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[45] M. D. Chenu, The Theology of Work, Chicago, 1963, p. 34.

[46] See pp. 19-20 and note Chenu's appreciation of Mounier's discussion of the maker of artifice.

The fear that holds many Christians to a belief in the exemplary position of the rural artisan is based upon a romantic notion of work and a misunderstanding of the machine. Chenu proposes to de-mystify four "factors" associated with this sense of impending doom from technological invention. Genesis teaches the worker to take dominion over the earth and the machine, according to Chenu, is merely the "instrument of this creative enterprise." He writes that confidence in the worker "as a collaborator in creation and participant in his evolution by his discovery, exploiting and spiritualizing Nature" must be restored. Similarly, the "constructive reason" that Chenu identifies as "rationalization" must also be embraced and accepted as congenial to the mission designed by God for human workers.

Chenu is particularly impatient with the attack upon the trend toward concentration in organizational process and structure. What mass assembly has exacted from the executor of work is a growing recognition of participation in a "collective consciousness" Chenu argues, asserting that individuals come to experience themselves as members of a "team" committed to a common purpose and "the common welfare." As this consciousness develops—a process which Chenu terms "socialization"—human history moves forward becoming more and more an expression of "a new heaven and a new earth."

> The grandeur of our era and its evangelical good fortune are due to the fact that the "industrialization" of the world has provoked, even in the

> midst of a dramatic crisis of unity, a realization of solidarity, in which poor and humble find freedom and fraternity through work and their common destiny. Salvation and history are one, a world history in which inner truths and social expression are no longer divided.[47]

In spite of this optimism, Chenu is mindful of the disparity between the oppressive realities of the industrial work-place and the vision of a reconciled earth. Marx is embraced as a "mystical and prophetic" humanist whose analysis has demonstrated the human truth that freedom emerges from a consciousness of misery. Affirming Marx's sentiments, Chenu writes: "Work is a subversive state which dehumanizes; only in emancipating labor will man regain his real nature." Work is, following this expression of liberating action, the principal endeavor of humankind to recover what has been lost through sin; its redemptive role unites spirit to matter and contributes to the completion of Creation.

The absence of historical and economic analysis in the theological writings of the nineteenth century Church distresses Chenu who attributes to a misplaced Platonism this orientation. Arguing that several centuries of misunderstanding of Augustine's message, compounded by an emphasis upon the ancient Greek belief in the absolute separation of soul and body, has turned the attention of Church scholars away from social realities, Chenu posits the value of Thomism. In Thomistic analysis dichotomies

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[47]Ibid., p. 101.

are set aside and the real world of human struggle and solution is addressed. Marx's insights ought not, he continues, be rejected because of the fear of communism and atheism; the sensitivity toward human oppression and the critical role of labor must be absorbed into modern theological discussion if the true status of work and worker is to be known. However neither idealism nor materialism offer an answer to human purpose and the relationship of work to divine purpose. Where idealism errs from elevating the soul's destiny and grasping human labor as merely a "means towards a transcendent end," materialism errs in disregarding the spiritual life and religious truth of human purpose. Marx and his adherents emphasized the "homo oeconomicus," subsuming all other activities of the human actor under the economic rubric. Chenu suggests that work is autonomous, possessing independent value, having "integrity" and "efficacy" in its own right but it is always a secondary human activity.

The argument concludes with a warning about Marx's failures to grasp the ultimate unity of human work as an effort toward liberation. Chenu asserts that historical movement has never been smooth, that progress comes with a surge of energy born of the striving for equilibrium between individual and community well-being. In the past Christianity assimilated this ebb and flow and in the modern industrial age it is equally important that fear of technology not dictate an approach that denies the needs of the

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working people. An integration of Marxism is no less absurd, Chenu observes, than the veritable baptism of Aristotle's homo naturalis through St. Thomas' efforts centuries before; Marx, too, can be made Christian and the economic being transformed into a holistic actor whose mission is attached to salvation history: "for grace today strives to find its earthly sphere of activity in an economy in which matter, in man, is itself saved."

Of the theologians reviewed in this juxtaposed reading, Chenu is the least compatible to Weil and her vision of the restored "civilization of work." Although all four French writers regard industrial conditions as the point of departure for discussion and have no illusions about the harmful circumstances within the factory, Weil is most anxious with respect to the perpetuation of the status quo. She enumerates as factors contributing to the realities of modern slavery the very factors Chenu lists as factors advancing the "socialization" of modern workers. From Chenu's vantage point, which is essentially an impatience with the anachronistic posture of the Church with regard to economic life, industrial modes of production promote both the skills and the consciousness necessary to historical change. He argues that the machine is not to be feared but embraced as the instrument which has shaped a "new consciousness"—that of the proletarian. He argues for the continued trend of rationalized procedures and concentrated organization; these innovations advance a sense of "collectivity," solidarity

and a better destiny in the future.

Clearly Weil understands the conditions of production in another light—a light that frames the laborer in a grim setting, bent and spiritless. Neither rationalization nor concentration would enhance the worker's position, and the only consciousness to emerge from the industrial workplace, she argued, was an attraction to the lies, false promises and comforts bandied about by the "Great Beast." It is ironic that Chenu would choose to reject the Platonic point of view, asserting its weakness as divisive, when Weil, by contrast, grasped that Plato's teaching was essential to the healing of ruptures. The creation and protection of metaxu—bridges across the divisions—was part of her program for labor reform; she would have the factory worker move to and from the life of the world and the spirit through ritual and sensitivity to beauty. It is ironic that Chenu rejects the nineteenth century moralisms of the Church about labor as romantic but fails to grasp a certain romanticization in his affirmation of technological developments. Weil's critique similarly set aside "idols" from the past but she looked at the conditions of the work-room and observed that the scale, pace and reward of this labor served only to convert humans into robots. The milieu was not conducive to team identification and a belief in the transforming effort of the laborer; it brought humiliation, fatigue and an over-riding sense of apathy. That which Chenu elevates—the collective consciousness—

comes close to what Weil called the idolatrous "we." She believed that the reign of the "Great Beast" fostered a general malaise and lack of discernment. The weary worker would agree to rubrics and slogans as consolation for a hard day's work and choose not to counter the images and goals of union organizers and political activists. This ennui was nothing more than an abandonment of the judgment all are entitled to exercise but few actually put into practice. The "we" assures such victims of malaise that greatness is shared, that the union's destiny or that of the nation, is for the greater "good" and to be a part of that destiny makes each member good. In Weil's judgment this defeat of individual participation—through thought and judgment—was not the triumph over the age, the competitive "I" but the triumph of idols in a world ceaselessly disrupted by falsehood and violence. The law of gravity captures all the subjects of the "Great Beast" and allows none to rise above the deception for a better look at the true circumstances. Weil, unlike Chenu, urges that the "we" and the "I" be renounced for truth; that the laborer accept the pain of knowledge and suffer through that knowledge to the truth of the Cross and human purpose which is to bear the Cross. In place of the nationalist's fervor and patriotism, Weil asks that the citizen realize the anguish of the colonized and refuse to give credence to the armies of plunderers; she asks that the beauty of culture be embraced not as human doing but a sign of God's

implicit love for creation.

Malheur in Weil's analysis is not comparable to the pain and struggle discussed by the other three theologians; her distinction between affliction and pain is critical in separating social theory from theology. She insists that malheur serves a spiritual function, opening a void that allows grace to penetrate the distracted human worker. Loss of time and place, of self and the desire for things, is the condition for grace. Her analysis offers affliction as the singular experience that brings all to the foot of the Cross and makes possible the fortification of the fragile spirit in a world hardened to compassion and solicitude. None of the other theologians write of such human pain and its spiritual function. Ricoeur recognizes the hardships of factory labor and proposes that a scheme which incorporates industrial democracy be implemented for the worker. Lacroix is less interested in the concrete approach to labor reform; his focus on the worker's conquest of nature sees pain as a necessary condition to the struggle and invariably overcome through the work process. Chenu's hope in the eventual Christianization of the proletarian and their movement to radically change the economic arrangements of work leads even further from Weil's point of departure.

The fundamental optimism of all three theologians distinguishes their understanding from the insights Weil provides about the scope and content of theology of work.

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Weil, of course, offered no explicit definition of the task nor did she write with a theological audience in mind. Her shorter political essays were addressed to colleagues in the syndicalist movement and her design was to encourage greater critical discernment about the real needs of workers. The longer essays—the 1934 "Testament" and the document written for the Free French—defined the nature of work in relation to liberty and the duty to obey necessity. Between the drafting of the two theoretical essays Weil never ceased in her reflections about work. Her pensée indicate the centrality of work as an aspect of her theological meditations and show how the earlier meanings of necessity and obedience take on a specifically spiritual meaning. "Harsh necessity," the experience of factory labor, becomes the necessity granted by God to assure order and beauty in the universe; obedience becomes a precondition of grace and Bacon's maxim shifts from a prescription about control over nature to a concern for the spirit's health through knowledge of limits.

In the years of Weil's writing career (1933-43) the world continued to follow a course of exploitation and brutality; the lack of optimism in Weil's social analysis was fed by the reality of economic depression, civil war, terror and ruthless political action. The modest works of the average laborer were overshadowed by the bombast of the "Romans," egocentric and greedy goals led reluctant citizens into warfare and slaughtered others. There was little reason for hope but Weil did not abandon

her belief in the vitality of the spirit; it could be nourished and repaired in spite of the barbarism of political events. She wrote because she hoped, and she hoped for a sympathetic ear that might have access to the building materials required for the metaxu which would provide pathways for the oppressed. A glimpse of universal beauty, a sense of God's love, she believed, would shatter a false idol here and a deception there.

Simone Weil wrote a theology of work that instructed her readers in the use of suffering; knowledge and compassion would come to the afflicted who remain loving and faithful. In a world filled with dark spots, a veritable cave of shadows, the burning passion of these faithful and loving is critical and Weil insisted upon bringing light from the soul into the bleak work-rooms and pillaged towns. Her optimism for the soul's work was reiterated whenever she wrote of individual efforts to cherish the fragile blossoms of the earth and relish the orderly dance of the stars in the night sky. Her optimism sings forth through the oppression of tyrants as she tells of knowledge and good as divine realities that inspire human good. In her attack on oppression in 1934 she held human reason above the brutality of the "Great Beast" and later, in her Notebooks, she affirmed the intuitive grasp that made every spiritual laborer feel at home in the

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universe.[48] She never waivered in her fundamental belief that every human being desires the good and would avoid force if the deceptive mantel was lifted and the light brought into the grim spaces. Only the metaxu—those bridges between worldly cares and spiritual life—could dispel the evil and her task in writing a theology of work was to identify these intermediary realities and assure every pedestrian that it is possible to cross over.

Although the truth of supernatural life would never be grasped by the spiritual laborer, no laborer ought to be kept from knowledge about the immediate responsibilities of this world. Weil's theology is programmatic, her metaxu embrace concern for the mystique of education, art, language, technique and machines and a commitment to bring information to every worker. For, in her analysis, joy is possible, its "sweet nourishment" not a diversion from compassion and solicitude, nor the same as pleasure. Joy is "participation in the world" and that requires information and access, the unity of thought and execution, workplace and community. Weil enjoyed the memory of 1936 and the sound of comrades singing in the Renault plant and the look of pride among some of her former co-workers who shepherded their wives and husbands around the rooms that

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[48] Note the epigraph at the start of her essay "Reflections," O&L, p. 37—Weil quotes Spinoza and Marcus Aurelius on the virtue of human reasoning.

they had briefly appropriated as their own. Metaxu retrieved and well-placed meant that workers would enjoy roots and feel free to raise their heads in appreciation of the God-given beauty of the universe. That is what she hoped for in a desperate time.

A Biographical Reading

> One reads, but also one is read by others. Interposition of such readings. To force somebody to read himself as you read him (slavery). To force others to read you as you read yourself (conquest).
>
> Mechanism?
>
> More often than not, dialogue between the deaf.[49]

An image of a greedy miser absorbed in the calculation of his hidden wealth recurs in the pages of Simone Weil's Notebooks; it is an image of erroneous reading. The hoarder values his stockpile of gold but the actual worth of the treasure remains concealed. The image is recast in one of Weil's last letters to her parents where she ponders her own worth and the inaccessibility of the gold she possesses and cannot pass on to others in need of her riches. She explains:

> . . . there is within me a deposit of pure gold which must be handed on. Only I become more and more convinced . . . there is no one to receive it. . . . Some people feel in a confused way that there is something. But once they have made a few polite remarks about my intelligence their conscience is clear. After which, they listen to me or read me with the same hurried attention which they give to everything, making up their

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[49] Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 43. (Weil's emphasis)

> minds definitely about each separate little hint of an idea as soon as it appears" "I agree with this," "I don't agree with that" . . . . In the end they say: "Very interesting," and pass on to something else. They have avoided fatigue.[50]

This melancholy observation serves as an introduction to the biographical reading of Weil; it is an uncanny anticipation of the distracted and impatient character of many of the studies dedicated to Weil's contribution.[51]

The method of lecture which demands of the reader tolerance of "fatigue," self-renunciation and an enduring patience is an instrument of spiritual awakening. The apprenticeship Weil insists as essential for superimposed reading teaches the user of the "blind man's stick" that reality is veiled and only a limited comprehension is ever possible for human beings. But the apprenticeship is long and difficult and the detours of false consciousness compelling. Only when the reader has managed to place appetites in abeyance and forsake distractions will reality yield to the stumbling pilgrim.

Unfortunately many of Weil's sympathetic critics as well as her detractors did not learn to read, did not accept the basic distinction between eating and looking that would assure an understanding of the subject as a dynamic actor. The misreadings of her life and thought

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[50] "Letter #66," 70 Letters, pp. 196-197.

[51] The studies undertaken by Cabaud, Pétrement and Rees are not included in this assessment of mis-reading.

have tended to flatten her contribution and place it in a context that was not her own; it tends to be a "dialogue between the deaf." Three approaches superimpose a mantel on Weil's reality rather than dislodge her hidden treasure: the reductionist perspective, the impressionist perspective, and the promotional perspective. The first emerges from an impatience with Weil's seemingly disordered and inconsistent pilgrimage. Often a "binary" theory of her biography is presented in this perspective which suggests that Weil lived two lives separated by a powerful conversion event.[52] A second orientation addresses the "sensational" features of Weil's biography, providing causal explanations often cast in the language of psychoanalysis.[53] This approach is complemented by one that delights in the "vivid moments" that impress and require no explanation.[54] Finally there are biographers and critics who embrace Weil's life as exemplary, an inspiration for her survivors.[55] Often this last perspective is enrichened with

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[52]See Roy Pierce, "Simone Weil" in Contemporary French Political Thought, N.Y., 1966, pp. 89-121.

[53]Note Charles Moeller, "Simone Weil et l'incroyance de croyants," Paris, 1957, pp. 220-55; this position will be discussed infra.

[54]Elizabeth Hardwick's impressionist position in her review of Petrement's biography is critical to this approach, N.Y. Times Book Review, Jan. 24, 1977, p. 1.

[55]Note Alfred Kazin, The Inmost Leaf, 1955, p. 212 who urges that we look not at Weil's words but her image.

contrasts that show how Weil is equal to those luminaries of history who have preceded her and commanded respect in the intellectual and religious circles that they would have her join.[56]

The enigmas and ambiguities that have prompted the misreading of Weil's life and contribution might well have been a source of understanding. Accounts which dismiss or explain the perplexing places in Weil's passage have missed her teaching about the consequences of lecture—one finally grasps the mysterious in an otherwise explicable world. Sontag seems to have glimpsed this meaning in her aside that Weil is not an authority for us to imitate but "the presence of mystery" in a human history that is rationalized and ordered by critics and scholars.[57] Weil wrote that the intuition of mystery requires an effort resembling the Kantian imperative: "To read in outward aspects something which another person, differently situated, differently affected is able to read—by making the same effort."[58] The biographer must abandon the ideas that fortify ego and turn to the others who have also opened themselves to genuine study; together the conversationalists will observe and listen without having to impose

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[56]Some of the comparisons are: St. Paul, Montaigne, Pascal, Emily Dickinson, Kierkegaard, D. H. Lawrence and Edith Stein.

[57]Susan Sontag, "Simone Weil," in Against Interpretation, N.Y., 1966, p. 50.

[58]Ntbk., Vol. 1, p. 39.

on the whole. The notion of preservation rather than creation is critical to her meaning—Venice required protection from avarice, texts demand attention not reconstruction. A dramatization of Weil's words and experiences has given the roundness to the subject's contribution that conforms to lecture—every performance recasts her meaning in new light, sound, interpretation.[59]

It is possible to approach Weil's biography with method and concern for particular issues so long as a definitive position is not taken. Following Weil's recommendation for dislodging the analogies she regarded as central to reasoning, issues have been "read . . . one into another" in the hope of dispelling the confusion that surrounds her identity and value. One controversy emerges from the question of the authenticity of Weil's religious identity. In spite of the self-conscious expression of her position in the "Spiritual Autobiography" there have been a number of critics who have challenged her Christian-Catholic identity and argued that she is either a heretic or "too eclectic" to be included under this rubric. Others have ignored her assessment of sainthood and urged that she be recognized as a modern saint. A related issue addresses the question of Weil's selfless behavior and the status of her emotional well-being.

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[59]Megan Terry, Approaching Simone, A Play, N.Y., 1973; Terry's drama won the Obie Award in 1969-70 and was thought to be a tremendous catalyst to the interest in in Weil's life.

Ironically, this discussion resonates the very same charges that Weil, a generation earlier, described as a "dubious psychology" in her scathing review of Ruehle's study of Karl Marx. In the denunciation of Ruehle's reductive analysis Weil explained that digestive troubles and allegations about the sentiment of inferiority about being Jewish clouded over the real meaning of Marx's undertaking.[60] Nonetheless, there are critical voices today that suggest Weil's death as a neurotic food complex (perhaps anorexia nervosa) and her life as a self-destructive history grounded on her hatred for the Jewish lineage that was hers.

There is one additional issue of controversy that merits attention—the role of Weil's political identity. Certain of Weil's critics decry her unstable ideological attachments, indicating that she remained bourgeois even in her radical activism. Again, there are others who approach the same factual materials and discover an entirely different experience and meaning. The degree to which Weil absorbed herself in left-wing politics or reactionary apologetics requires further inquiry. One feature of Weil's theoretical writing embraces all of these controversial positions surrounding the matter of identity. It is the idea of the "Great Beast" as a compelling source

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[60]Note Cabaud's discussion of her review of Otto Ruehle's Life of Karl Marx, p. 101; the book review appeared in 1933.

of illusion which obfuscates and distorts. Weil believed that evil would not disappear from the earth's surface but she hoped that the consequences of false authority might be challenged and, indeed, balanced by a closer and more truthful reading of reality.

The Christian authority of Weil is examined in Frénaud's essay and rejected because of her intellectual pride.[61] Denying that mystical gifts are bestowed on those of humble disposition and obedience to tradition, Frénaud urges that Weil not be "put forward as an example." His argument is summed up in the following passage:

> It is therefore not only the content of the Catholic faith which she rejects but our whole concept of faith and the manner in which we exercise it. She rejects all idea of submission of the intelligence to the divine authority exercised by the Church. To my mind this attribute constitutes the most powerful argument against the reality of authentic supernatural life in the case of Simone Weil.[62]

The quotation is useful precisely because it raises two questions about religious identity in the same condemnation: what constitutes authentic faith or sanctity? how can individual intelligence and Church teaching be reconciled? Weil puzzled over these questions and wrote to

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[61] Georges Frénaud, "Simone Weil's Religious Thought . . .," 1953, pp. 349-76.

[62] Ibid., p. 51; Pétrement argues, conversely, that her mystical experiences are genuine because they infuse her life;

her spiritual companions about her position.

Weil's consciousness of her religious gift was not a source of pride nor a subject she shared with many. Her spiritual experiences were reluctantly and modestly told to Father Perrin in order that he might understand her resistance to the Church and its sacramental authority.[63] She believed herself to be mistakenly selected by divine grace, noting that God makes use of "castaway objects." She speaks not with the voice of an arrogant rebel against authority but a surprised (and somewhat humorous) recipient of a miraculous insight. "Ideas come and settle in my mind by mistake," she writes modestly to Father Perrin, "then, realizing their mistake, they absolutely insist upon coming out."[64] Weil does not believe that she has created the ideas nor chosen the mission—she sees herself as a vehicle for God's purposes. She prays that she "become nothing" in order to avoid blocking the passage of light and identifies her vocation as that of anonymity, "ever ready to be mixed into the paste of common humanity."[65]

For some of her admirers such selflessness, coupled with the content of her testimony, elevates Weil to sainthood. Coles and Davy express this sanctity differently but

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[63]"Spiritual Autobiography," WG, pp. 61-83.

[64]Ibid., p. 82.

[65]"Hesitations Cpncerning Baptism," WG, p. 49; spiritual obedience for Weil is "to be impelled, but without knowing whither."

concur that she is a witness to the ongoing presence in history of divinely inspired actors.[66] Weil, however, would have recoiled from such an assessment, seeing herself as far too blemished and mutilated by desire and worldly oppression to function as a saint.[67] She perceived herself simply as a bearer of the Cross, uprooted and lacking in solace.

Adamant in his denunciation of Weil's Christian identification, Moeller provides the contradictory position his subject believed to be part of the experience of the real.[68] Moeller presents her as a heretic who deceives her admirers by appearing to be other than what she is—a captive to Satan's forces. "Her Christianity is an antithetical retort to all the essential dogmas of the Judeo-Christian tradition," Moeller writes and adds that she committed herself to six heresies.[69] The crux of his attack

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[66]Robert Coles writes that she rejected pride and vanity, possessing a "spirit in the tradition of saints, who were never meant to be glorified on this earth" (N.Y. Times, Oct. 11, 1975); M. M. Davy, The Mysticism of Simone Weil, p. 84, avers that Weil "initiated a new form of saintliness" which saw her act as "leaven" in the "dough that is humanity."

[67]See her discussion in "Last Thoughts," WG, pp. 100-101; she had occasion during an earlier period to comment on a former classmate's evaluation of her as a saint and heroine, noting cryptically that these were "inadmissible epithets" (See Petrement, op. cit., p. 246).

[68]C. Moeller, op. cit.; Weil saw contradiction as a source of "the real," writing that contradiction loosens up the fictions and directs our attention toward a more transparent grasp of reality.

[69]Moeller, p. 239; the heresies: Gnosticism, Manicheism, Catharism, Stoicism, Syncretism and Intellectualism.

on Weil is her alleged confusion. He writes that she was victim to an isolation based on her refusal to be feminine; she was overwhelmed by "secret sensualism," phallic envy and intellectual arrogance.[70] These crippling problems, Moeller concludes, make her an impossible example of Christian witness.

Although Moeller believed Weil to be confused, she writes with a voice of certitude about her reasons for being an "outsider" in the Church. Neither the argument of sanctity nor heresy offered by her critics embrace her meaning, a meaning based upon the dialectic of disavowal of tyranny and commitment to the oppressed and beautiful. She cannot be baptized in the Church because, she reasons, it is an institution associated with the power politics of the "Great Beast." Lacking in generosity, through its arbitrary rulings of exclusion (who shall receive sacramental blessing, who shall not), the Church also closes itself off from the insights developed by other cultures. She writes to Father Perrin that her love for the universe and the ubiquitous appreciation of the elements as religious symbols (fire and water) make it impossible for her to belong:

> You can take my word for it too that Greece, Egypt, ancient India, and ancient China, the beauty of the world, the pure

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[70] In the following section on Weil's emotional health more will be said about Moeller's psychoanalytical assessment.

> and authentic reflections of this beauty in art and science, what I have seen of the inner recesses of human hearts where religious belief is unknown, all these things have done as much as the visibly Christian ones to deliver me into Christ's hands as his captive . . . . The love of those things that are outside visible Christianity keeps me outside the Church.[71]

The breadth of sources Weil tapped for spiritual inspiration was grounded on her theology of God's implicit love. She drew upon Taoist texts, the Hindu teachings of the Upanishads, European and American Indian folklore and the mystical thoughts of Milarepa. In those diverse materials she discovered the same metaphors she found in the New Testament.[72] Her bewilderment persisted to the last about a church that calls itself "Catholic" but remains insulated from the beauty of religious expression in eastern and pre-Christian society.

The Church's exercise of regulatory power was equally disturbing to Weil. She explained to a friend just months before she died that her status as an outsider was a "social reality" but not a sacramental reality. "I think it is a sacrament simply to look at the host and the chalice during the elevation," she added, indicating

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[71] "Last Thoughts," op. cit., pp. 94-95; elsewhere she wrote of her "vocation . . . to be a Christian outside the Church," Letter to a Priest, p. 11.

[72] See "God in Plato," On S.N.L., passim; also the "N.Y. and London Ntbks," passim.

elsewhere that the exclusion of the faithful from any sacrament was a grave error.[73] But her fundamental opposition to the Church was in its "totalitarianism"—"the use of two little words: anathema sit."[74]

> Christianity has, in fact, since the very beginning, or nearly so, suffered from an intellectual malaise. This malaise is due to the way in which the Church has conceived its power of jurisdiction and especially the use of the formula anathema sit. Wherever there is an intellectual malaise, we find the individual is oppressed by the social factor, which tends to become totalitarian . . . . This formula and the use to which it has been put prevent the Church from being Catholic other than in name.[75]

Weil renounced Church power and the manifestations of the "Great Beast" within Catholicism but she embraced the same as a "religion of slaves." Her commitment to this faith of sufferers was tenacious and she thought of malheur as a "marvel of divine technique" that authentic Christians experienced. Affliction cannot be appeased or dispelled. It is the condition for knowing the "immensity" of creation and the human share in God's enduring love. Weil believed herself to be marked indelibly as a

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[73]"Letter #53," 1943 (M. Schumann), 70 Letters, p. 172.

[74]"Spiritual Autobiography," op. cit., p. 82; see M. Chaning-Pearce, "Christianity's Crucial Conflict, The Case of Simone Weil," 1951, pp. 333-40, for an interesting discussion of ideological strain within the Chruch.

[75]Letter to a Priest, op. cit., pp. 62-63.

slave, she practiced a disciplined regimen of prayer and contemplation and she regarded herself as a faithful adherent to the true Church; she remained convinced of this to her death. One of her admirers writes of her faith as an achievement in reconciliation:

> Her whole spirit was distended grievously, between those two realities, the reality of God and the reality of human suffering and human death; she took part in both, embraced both.[76]

Although this capacity for stretching herself between two realms brought to Berrigan a sense of Weil's magnanimity, to Buber the identification with such melancholy ways is cause for criticism. He regrets Weil's inability to accept and know Judaism but is totally unsympathetic with her negative martyrdom.[77] He condemns her self-deprecatory language as a form of escapism and observes that Judaism teaches God's people to take joy from creation and celebrate the beauties of community and nature.[78]

Less temperate than Buber in his assessment of Weil's Jewish identity is Meyerhoff who claims she was a "desperate nihilist" who turned her disgust with Judaism into self-contempt and a pernicious attack on her people. Declaring that the saintly attributes given to Weil are exaggerations of her person, Meyerhoff writes:

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[76]Daniel Berrigan (with Robert Coles), "Dialogue From the Underground," NY Review of Books, op. cit., p. 17.

[77]Martin Buber, "The Silent Question" in On Judaism, 1972, pp. 202-213.

[78]Note Gabriel Marcel's opposition to Weil as "la vivante negation" in his introductory remarks to Davy's autobiography of Simone Weil, 1956.

> It is odd how such reviews make their appearance, but it is perhaps more disturbing to see how Simone Weil is presented to the public as nothing but a spiritual hero—a woman endowed with a restless, brilliant mind . . . a woman who explored the mysteries of divine love and transformed herself into a "pilgrim of the absolute." This transfiguration of Simone Weil has now become the conventional public portrait. Perhaps she was all these things, but she was more: she was also blind, cruel, and almost delusional, and she indulged in orgies of self-laceration. Did she draw up the terrible indictment of the religion of her people in order to inflict yet deeper wounds upon herself, and did she believe this new agony would make her more pleasing in the eyes of the new God?[79]

Meyerhoff believes that her self-destructive urge was so overwhelming that it brought her to "extreme religious anti-Semitism." He argues that her adolescent bouts with profound inferiority matured into a vicious attack upon her people in "the language of their worst enemies and persecutors."[80]

The charge of cruelty refers, in Meyerhoff's account, to Weil's insensitivity to the plight of the Jews during the very time that she was renouncing the Old Testament. His indictment rests upon a faulty understanding of two matters: Weil's theoretical posture regarding ancient Judaism and her consciousness of being a Jew. There is little

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[79] Hans Meyerhoff, "Contra Simone Weil" in Cohen, 1970, pp. 75-76. (Meyerhoff's emphasis)

[80] This position has been repeated by other critics of Weil who find her to be "an implacable anti-Semite"; see, for example, Norma Rosen's review of Petrement in Ms., Sept. 1977.

doubt about Weil's rejection of the Hebrew teaching of chosen people and the nationalist flavor of the Old Testament. To collapse her resistance to the words of scripture into an argument for her anti-Semitism is entirely unfounded. The same reluctance Weil had for the Church of the Roman Catholics was critical to her reasoning about Judaism as a religion of a chosen nation—no power, she believed with all her heart, can prevail upon a people to exclude others from God's community.

Pétrement indicates that Weil was oblivious to her Jewish identification during her college years.[81] In any case she indicated her sentiments about this association at the time that she was engaged in correspondence with the French bureaucracy. Not only did she question the authority of the government to discriminate against Jewish professionals but she showed her utter contempt for the officials of the Vichy regime in their implementation of anti-semitic policy. In an exchange of letters between 1940 and 1942 Weil questioned certain bureaucrats about the scope of the legislation, mocking the mode of classification and its relevance to her experience.[82] With a

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[81]She reports that Weil showed surprise on the occasion of being associated with Judaism in a casual conversation. It is of note that Hannah Senesh, the heroic Jewish martyr of Israel, knew nothing of her own Jewish identity until she was labelled as a Jew by the Fascist government of Hungary.

[82]See J. Cabaud, pp. 223-24 and S. Pétrement, pp. 390-92 for discussion.

firm conviction she explained to the Minister of Education:

> the concept of heredity may be applied to race, but it is difficult to apply it to religion. I, myself, who profess no religion and never have, have certainly inherited nothing from the Jewish religion . . . mine is the Christian, French, Greek tradition. The Hebraic tradition is alien to me, and no statute can make it otherwise. If, nevertheless, the law insists that I consider the term, "Jew," whose meaning I don't know, as applying to me, I am inclined to submit, as I would to any other law.[83]

She added that she would like to be enlightened about the criterion for her resolution and, if the law is inapplicable to her, to be hastily established at a teaching post.

No response was sent her but some time later she addressed another letter to the Commissioner of Jewish Affairs requesting that the indemnity be paid to her that was owed to Jewish professionals.[84] The tone is "at once ironic and sincere," noting that she has enjoyed working in the grape fields as a consequence of her exclusion from teaching. But she adds that the legislation is "unjust and absurd, for how can one believe that a university graduate in mathematics could harm children who study geometry by the mere fact that three of his grandparents attended a synagogue?"[85] Her bitterness toward arbitrary authority continued even after her departure from France and she

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[83] "What is a Jew?", (letter to Minister of Education, November 1940), reprinted in Politics, Winter 1949.

[84] Petrement, pp. 443-44.

[85] Note the U.S. Supreme Court dicta in Barsky v. U.S., 1954 where it inquired into the exclusion of a surgeon from his practice because of alleged communist sympathies.

wrote just months before her collapse that post-war France must refrain from establishing a "crystalized Jewish minority" which might be easily rounded up as a reserve corps for "future atrocities."[86]

Although Meyerhoff found Weil's self-hatred detrimental to European Jewry during the Nazi reign, Fiedler looks upon the same person and texts and discovers a modern Jeremiah roaming the urban by-ways of the Continent. He embraces her estranged pilgrimage as the movement of a Jewish saint of the absurd: "The absurdity, the absolution, the incadescence of the prophets survive in Simone Weil, and for all her blemishes, their terrible purity."[87] She has a madness about her that is understandable from the perspective of divine mission.

> One thinks finally of Don Quixote, of Melville's Pierre, of the tragic buffoons who can never keep our time because they are set by the eternal chronometer—of the Holy Fool, whose wisdom is an unforseen power of what we call stupidity, the ridiculous raised to the level of the ultimate, divine, absurd.[88]

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[86] See Pétrement, op. cit., p. 510; note that Weil was consistently opposed during this period to the idea of a Jewish minority and hoped for speedy "assimilation."

[87] Leslie Fiedler, "Simone Weil: Prophet Out of Israel" in Cohen, op. cit., pp. 52-69; see also E. Jennings, "A World of Contradictions" in Every Changing Shape, London, 1961, pp. 131-39, for another version of the Jew as "wandering seer."

[88] Fiedler, op. cit., p. 56.

To this enthusiastic attribution of prophetic iconoclasm, Weil had simply observed that (in writing about others) religious inspiration lies beyond description.[89]

The ineffable character of Weil's identity, according to another critic, is based upon erroneous impression and hasty conclusion.[90] Dujardin offers a "collated interpretation" of her words and experiences which focuses upon an "irreducible clarity"—the role of the Helot. He insists that she, like her ancient predecessors, lived at the marginal level of a militant society—a slave of austere and ascetic disposition. Unlike Moeller who interprets from Weil's alleged personality flaws a woman of damaged perception and faith, Dujardin builds upon the same allegations and offers a more positive composite. He accepts the notions of adolescent stress and sexual confusion but he champions her ability to control and utilize her vulnerabilities. Despite hammering headaches which inured her to physiological agony, despite her sense of marginality, Weil—says Dujardin—transformed her liabilities into a socially valuable activism. "In transforming a purely negative and corrosive compulsion while observing the pain of others, she assumes a precarious compromise between her will to escape

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[89] G&G, p. 153: " . . . behavior, thoughts, and feelings" of inspired believers "is impossible to define."

[90] Phillipe Dujardin, Simone Weil, Grenoble, 1965.

from the world of Platonic necessity, and her refusal to let this 'necessity' crush people."[91]

For all that discipline, however, Weil remained a victim to divisive ambivalence. Dujardin insists that she oscillated between self-serving egocentricity and a selfless altruism—she was torn by the will to be seen and be melted into the crowd. This reading by Weil's critic confuses her meaning of "decreation" as a spiritual reaching toward transcendence. In short, Dujardin's analysis does not differ markedly from those offered by Meyerhoff and Moeller; all are bewildered by the persistent energy of a woman who seemingly willed herself into the grave. Whether the explanation is cast in psychoanalytic language and the argument of morbid self-destructiveness or in Dujardin's language of helotism, Weil's desire for ego-liberation and authentic compassion seems to be forgotten.

Decreation, in Weil's reflections, evolves from love rather than the absence of self-love; it is an abandonment of the "I" for the sake of others. Her imagery of solicitude parallels that of her explanation to Father Perrin about the necessity to communicate God's words: she is a receptacle, an obedient and passive servant doing God's bidding.[92] In helping those in need

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[91]Ibid., p. 47.

[92]The reference to Father Perrin is to her "Spiritual Autobiography," p. 82; it is notable that

Weil saw herself a conduit, carrying necessities from one to another place. She explained to Antonio, a Spanish friend interned at Vernet, that her gift of money must be free of any sense of indebtedness on his part:

> I never have the impression this money belongs to me. . . . It simply passes from my hands to those of someone else who needs it, and I have the feeling that I am not at all involved. I would really prefer that money was like water and that it flowed off by itself whenever there was a little too much of it.[93]

Water, the transparent substance that follows necessity with perfect obedience appears in this context, as elsewhere in Weil's writing, as impassive reality. She had written of her wish to be a still pool of water—indifferent and impartial to all objects that would fall upon her; necessity knows nothing of social pressure and the judgments accorded to human beings. This wish expressed in her discussion of vocation is recast as a vision of true generosity of spirit in her discussion of solicitude. Obedience—the virtue of baptism—requires action <u>from</u> necessity rather than <u>for</u> necessity; one gives because there is no other way, one accepts for the same reason. "Only the absolute identification of justice and love makes the co-existence possible of compassion and gratitude on

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contrary to Moeller's discovery of phallic imagery, Weil's spiritual language indicates a pervasive attraction to feminine images: vessels, eggs, conduits, etc.

[93]Petrement, op. cit., pp. 415-16; both legend (the giving of sugar to soldiers during the First World War) and documented history (sharing her wages with the unemployed) indicate the constancy of this sentiment.

the one hand, and on the other, of respect for the dignity of affliction in the afflicted—a respect felt by the sufferer himself and the others."[94]

The sacramental meaning of solicitude where the self is washed away by compassion distinguishes almsgiving and charity.[95] The transaction of benefactor and recipient, according to thie understanding, involves co-equals in an impossible exchange.

> Compassion and gratitude come down from God, and when they are exchanged in a glance, God is present at the point where the eyes of those who give and those who receive meet. The sufferer and the other love each other, starting from God, through God, but not for the love of God; they love each other for the love of the one for the other. This is an impossibility. That is why it comes about only through the agency of God.[96]

The triad of malheur, attention and metaxu comes to life in such an exchange—the suffering of another becomes one's own through looking and the mediation of the self as benefactor. Weil writes of the Samaritan as one "who stops and looks," attention is given to "this absent humanity, and the actions which follow prove that it is a question of real attention."[97]

The Samaritan is an appropriate image in describing

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[94]"Forms of Implicit Love," WG, p. 140.

[95]Ibid., p. 147: "Almsgiving when it is not supernatural is like a sort of purchase."

[96]Ibid., p. 151.

[97]Ibid., p. 149.

Weil's will to self-abnegation. She gave to her compatriots without hesitance and seems to have taken little from them to repair a frail reputation. She did not sacrifice, as some do, for the sake of having friends or from some sense of obligation. She longed for true friends and believed, on the other hand, that friendship was an impossibility—a miracle of irreconcilable impulses.[98]

As a consequence of her writings expressing anxiety toward the co-existence of two autonomous wills and the fear of betrayal, many commentaries about Weil assume her to have been friendless.[99] Such an assessment is erroneous and has been mistakenly applied by several critics to her political identity. There is much evidence that Simone Weil enjoyed close relationships with both men and women. In spite of this one critic has written that Weil's "anti-political" disposition was grounded on her disinclination for social contact. "Politics," O'Brien observes, "proceeds by associations of people, and Simone Weil had a deep aversion from such associations. This is why I call her anti-political."[100] He notes that her intellectualism

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[98]Ibid., p. 207-8; friendship collapses either from dominance or dependency because friends feel the pull of making the other part of the self.

[99]Pétrement reports Weil's anxiety about imaginative friendships and the desire to be clear about love, pp. 222-23.

[100]Conor Cruise O'Brien, "The Anti-Politics of Simone Weil," N.Y. Review of Books, May 12, 1977, pp. 23-28, p. 23.

and need for pure truth kept her from the hub-bub of the politician's caucus and deaf to Burke's maxim regarding the "economy of truth." Ironically this critic of Weil's alleged incapacity for practical politics arrives at the same conclusion held by his subject—truth and good cannot be reconciled in the political arena; for O'Brien, the good demands compromise, for Weil it is a virtue belonging to the supernatural realm.

> We aspire only to get rid of the intolerable burden of the good-evil cycle, a burden assumed by Adam and Eve.
>
> In order to do that, it is necessary either to confuse "the essence of the necessary with that of the good" or to depart from this world.
>
> Evil can only be purified by God or by the social beast.[101]

The rule of force, according to Weil, is a rule of limitless power while the submission to necessity "delivers us from the burden" of evil. Dujardin looks upon Weil's paradoxical reflections as symptomatic of her ambivalent personality. He does not focus upon her inability to make and keep friendships, as does O'Brien, but emphasizes her philosophic dualism, her ambivalence toward self-disclosure, and her failure to cope with disappointment as reasons for political fickleness. He writes of her "astonishing reversion" in two decades from a "lucid pessimism" oriented toward the poor and oppressed to a proto-fascist sympathy.

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[101] G&G, p. 158.

> Prisoner of the duality of her psychological construction, impregnated with a bourgeoise individualism which was that of her family's and her professional milieu, an expert of doctrines susceptible to contradiction, Simone Weil is thus a victim, sliding from bolshevism to corporatism, in an epoch marked by historical manicheism.[102]

Dujardin's thesis parallels, to some extent, that of the writers who look upon Weil's religious conversion as a rupture in her political consciousness and activism.[103] Although his conclusions derive from a theory of personality (ambivalence) and an assessment of a-historicism, rather than the "binary" approach of the other critics, the meaning is the same. Weil lost her radical verve and assumed a conservative political posture.

Weil's experiences and her words disprove the conclusions reached by O'Brien and Dujardin—she enjoyed friendships and she wrestled with the question of political oppression consistently until her collapse. Pétrement's account, indeed the loyalty of Pétrement to her college friend, indicates the capacity Weil possessed for association.

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[102] Ibid., p. 190; Dujardin is in error about Weil's sympathies for bolshevism and corporatism—she decried the politics of the USSR and looked upon capitalist politics as pernicious. What Dujardin is unsettled most by is Weil's collapsing of Nazi and Communist politics into the same rubric of totalitarianism.

[103] R. Pierce, op. cit., and C. Moeller, op. cit., are two of the "binary" commentators who see Weil as having had two lives—a political and a religious split. R. Rees, Carbondale, 1966, rejects this division as a biographical reality.

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Her political encounters with the syndicalists in St. Étienne (namely the Thévenons), with the journalists of the left (Boris Souvarine), with the Free French activists (Maurice Schumann) are well-documented and demonstrate the warmth and intensity of the woman who feared the "dream of friendship." She had expressed to one of her intimate friends (Posternak) how she hoped to find Tommaso Cavalieri, Michelangelo's friend, when she visited Florence because that friendship was an inspiration to her.[104] It is not by chance, however, that among her closest friends in later years were those to whom she wrote letters and rarely, if ever, saw. Joë Bousquet, the bed-ridden war veteran, and Antonio, the encamped Spaniard, are recipients of her confidences and she writes to them both of her earnest wish for their joy and release from suffering. But Gustav Thibon and Father Perrin were seen often and as loved brothers during the last year of her life in France. To both she entrusted much of her writing and risked losing their loyalty to her because of her drive for honesty.[105] For the many extraordinary exchanges Weil initiated and nourished, she also preserved a deep sense of her solitude and the wonders of standing apart as a beholder of the love and beauty of the

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[104] Pétrement, op. cit., p. 310.

[105] Note Pétrement, p. 439 regarding Weil's criticism of Thibon and her worry that she might lose his friendship.

universe.[106] To Antonio, then in Africa, she shares the bliss of being alone and meditates on the water, sky and planets:

> When the sun sets or rises in a vast landscape, there is no more complete harmony than silence. Even if men talk and make noise around them, one can hear the silence that glides above and extends as far as the sky. I am happy that you have pure water; pure water is a beautiful thing. The nights must be very clear and full of stars in Africa . . . . There is no greater joy for me than looking at the sky on a clear night with an attention so concentrated that all my other thoughts disappear; then one can think that the stars enter into one's soul.[107]

Weil's politics reflect an unending dialectic between her impulse toward solicitude and her impulse toward solitude. She heroically sacrificed health and goods for others but she inevitably risked misunderstanding and loneliness. She wrote of her desire to be part of a common paste but found herself an outsider—not inside the Church, the union, the political party. She grasped the Christian meaning of this lonely vigil in writing of bread and stone as love: "We must eat the bread and lay ourselves open to the stone, so that it may sink as deeply as possible into our flesh."[108]

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[106] G. Panichas, N.Y., 1977 quotes from a plaque on her gravestone written in Italian and expressive of her solitude, p. xvii.

[107] Petrement, op. cit., p. 415.

[108] "Forms of Implicit Love," WG, p. 157.

The selection of Antigone's drama as the one to educate factory workers in compassion is a symbolic gesture; the heroic and tragic love of the ancient Greek woman inspired Weil to accept the role of the polity's conscience.[109] Antigone refused to submit to authority and Simone Weil refused the illusory promises of revolution.[110] The deceptions propounded by visionaries and officials were not to be left unchallenged—the collective "we" was to be transformed into a rooted community but not without tremendous self-sacrifice. Weil's hope in the intermediary relationship, the counterweight to disequilibrium, was a hope for the eradication of tyranny and the exposure of the oppressor within herself. "The Great Beast," she averred, "is the only object of idolatry, the only ersatz of God, the only imitation of something which is infinitely far from me and which is I myself."[111]

Dujardin's accusations of political instability were anticipated by Weil. Writing to her friend Wahl before her departure for London in 1942, she asks that he dispel the rumors circulating about her alleged sympathy for Pétain and the government of wartime France. Having explained her activities since the fall of Paris, she disputes

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[109] Weil's essay on Antigone was originally written in 1936 for a factory newspaper and is published in Intim, pp. 18-23.

[110] Weil calls herself "Antigone" in a letter to her parents in 1942 ("Letter #9," 70 Letters, p. 161) and is referred to as a modern Antigone by both G. Marcel, op. cit and D..Soelle, Suffering, Philadelphia, 1976.

[111] G&G, p. 216.

the careless appellation of traitor or coward by those who do not understand the hardships of national conquest.

> The word traitor should only be used about those of whom one feels certain that they desire Germany's victory and are doing what they can to that end. As for the others, some of those who are prepared to work with Vichy or even with the Germans may have honourable motives which are justified by particular situations. And others may be constrained by pressures which they could only resist if they were heroes. Most of the people here, however, who set themselves up as judges have never had an opportunity to find out if they themselves are heroes. I detest facile, unjust, and false attitudes, and especially when the pressure of public opinion seems to make them almost obligatory.[112]

She was refused her opportunity to test for personal heroism by the Free French officials. The disappointment was overwhelming and the basis of her decision to no longer speak with her friend Schumann whom she felt had given her no support. Moreover, she challenged his association with the Gaullist powers of the movement, arguing from her hospital bed (before she had taken an oath to remain silent in his presence) that the objectives of Gaullism approached those of the fascist powers they struggled against.[113]

Weil's activism was never abandoned. It became an expression, in her last years, however, of her theological

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[112]"Letter #49." op. cit., pp. 158-59.

[113]Petrement, op. cit., p. 533.

stance. She regarded her spiritual mission as one with her political sympathies and rejected escapism:

> We must eliminate affliction as much as we can from social life, for affliction only serves the purposes of grace, and society is not a society of the elect.[114]
>
> To contemplate the social is as good a way of detachment as to retire from the world. That is why I have not been wrong to rub shoulders with politics for so long.[115]

Hers was a paradoxical view that called for detachment and obedience to serve the spirit and attachment to rooted communities (and metaxu) as well as participation in the task of correcting disequilibrium for the sake of the world. For the world remains the order in which human creation moves; it is "the closed door," the "barrier." On the other hand "it is the way through."

Conclusion

> . . . she is to be taken on her own terms first.[116]

In reading the theological contribution and the secondary accounts of Weil's contribution paradox remains. For many of Weil's critics the untidiness of her life experiences and the lack of system in her thoughts compels superimposing a structure upon her work rather than following her process of superimposed reading. But the conferees

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[114] G&G, p. 215. [115] Ibid., p. 218.

[116] M. Ferber, "Simone Weil's Iliad," (Lecture 5), Cambridge, MIT Conference, 1976, p. 35.

of a meeting devoted to Weil's meaning for us in the present social circumstances agreed that something in the order of her lecture must be adhered to for greater understanding. George White put it this way:

> If this lecture series illustrated anything it must be that the world is indeed of a piece though that piece appears as contradiction and it resists comprehension without a great deal of patience. A second thought must be that true comprehension must come collectively through an entire range of discourse . . . from discussion and dialogue to argument and rejection.[117]

The truth of Weil will not be yielded up by a single reading of her texts or of her pilgrimage; the surface reading will prove to be illusory. Patience and attention are demanded of the analyst and the biographer. As Weil has written of her spiritual journey: "One of the principal truths of Christianity . . . is that looking is what saves us."[118] Our reading through the layers, beyond the pieces of evidence and ostensible fact to the more questionable facets, will bring us closer to the mystery of being.[119] We will, then, have only begun to lift up our heads and hearts to the mysterious unity of truth, beauty and the good.

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[117] Ibid., "Introduction," p. 2.

[118] "Forms of Implicit Love," op. cit., p. 192.

[119] David Anderson, Simone Weil, London, 1971, p. 68: "What delighted her most was the discovery of a hidden relationship, an illuminating comparison, an unexpected resemblance which opened mystery to the understanding."

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